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LEARNING COMMUNITIES OR SUPPORT GROUPS: THE USE OF  
STUDENT COHORTS IN DOCTORAL EDUCATIONAL  
LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## ABSTRACT

### LEARNING COMMUNITIES OR SUPPORT GROUPS: THE USE OF STUDENT COHORTS IN DOCTORAL EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

By Christy J. Brown, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

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Department of Educational Leadership  
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This mixed-method study explored how students in a doctoral educational leadership cohort at one university used the cohort structure as a learning community or as a method of social support. Survey data were collected from 45 past and present cohort students and qualitative data were collected from three focus groups of 15 participants total. The survey measured four factors: General Cohort Experience, Trust Within the Cohort, Network, and Community of Learners. Quantitatively, one cohort was found to be significantly different from the others in terms of Trust Within the Cohort; and the 60 hour cohorts were found to be more satisfied with the cohort experience than the 48 hour doctoral cohorts at the university studied. The theme of trust and support from and to fellow members both during and after the cohort had dissolved was a strong recurrent theme in this study. Cohort members felt that they developed and strengthened their skills professionally as a result of participating in the cohort; however,

they first had to develop a sense of community and trust with their fellow members in order to learn from them.

## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

A cohort has been defined as “a group of about 10-25 students who begin a program of study together, proceed together through a series of developmental exercises in the context of that program of study, and end the program at approximately the same time” (Barnett & Muse, 1993, p. 401). A cohort is not simply a group though. Yerkes, Basom, & Barnett, & Norris (1995) ascertain that “groups of people who happen to share the same space, time, professors, and assignments and who enjoy each other’s company for a year or two, are not necessarily cohorts. Effective groups work together, provide assistance to each other, find success in their efforts; while, at the same time, developing each individuals’ talents over a period of time” (p. 4).

It has been theorized that the use of cohorts in educational leadership programs has grown in recent years after a stagnant 30-year period because of its ability to meet the needs of a certain type of student, the adult student, who is most often found in a cohort. It is also a method that has been used to address criticism of the public educational system that resulted from the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Excellence* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) as well as the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The effects of the above reforms have not been limited to the public school system though. Preparation programs at the university level for school administrators have also been required to engage in reforming and restructuring their programs to ensure that principals,

teachers, and superintendents are adequately being prepared to face the challenges of this movement. One of the methods often used to meet this need has been the implementation of the cohort model in university programs (Barnett & Muse, 1993).

Barnett and Muse (1993) often characterize a cohort as having certain characteristics, such as the sharing by all members of a common schedule—all members take classes together in a predetermined order, as well as their size, typically from 10 to 25 students. There are typically two types of cohorts, a closed or pure cohort and a fluid or course by course cohort. A closed or pure cohort refers to one in which students take all of their classes together in a predetermined order and are only allowed to enter the program at the beginning of its inception. A fluid or course by course cohort refers to one in which students can join the group at other times rather than only at the beginning of the cohort.

### **Background**

The beginnings of cohort programs can be traced back to the early 1950s at the University of Texas. However, the use of the structure fell out of favor during the 1960s because of reasons relating to economics and the framework for public education at that time. During this time period in schools, the principal was the sole decision maker and leader in the school. The balance of power was not shared amongst staff members. As this was in conflict with the foundation upon which the cohort model is founded, the two frameworks could not coexist with one another (Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett, 1997).

Since the late 1980s, the Danforth Foundation has most often been credited with the resurgence in the number of cohort-based programs that are used frequently in educational leadership programs (Barnett & Muth, 2003). It has been estimated that presently more than 50% of leadership programs use the cohort model in their preparation program. Beginning in 1986,

the Danforth Foundation has awarded grants to 22 university administrator preparation programs for reformation and restructuring, as well as funded leadership programs across the United States to improve the quality of education and preparation that administrative students are receiving. Helping future leaders in the field of education understand the connection between theory, knowledge, and practice is the primary aim of the program.

There are a variety of benefits cited concerning the use of the cohort model. According to Siefert and Mandzuk (2006), cohorts promote the forming of supportive social connections between members and it is hoped that these ties will endure after the cohort is dissolved. Cohorts also aim to produce mutual academic and intellectual stimulation through the critiquing and sharing of materials, ideas, and resources. Finally, from the perspective of the university, it is easier to organize and facilitate cohort students because they all take the same classes at the same time.

It has also been noted by other researchers that the cohort is more than just a model to deliver a program. Instead, it is considered to be a learning model for more mature or adult students (Barnett & Muse, 1993). Adult students tend to have stronger internal motivation and be more self-directed. Thus, it has been argued that the cohort model engages members in a more meaningful way than other more traditional structures used to deliver programs. Adult learners have had a wider array of experiences and a more expansive frame of reference upon which to base new learning. Additionally, they are motivated to learn about things that are meaningful to them.

When examining the positive aspects of use associated with cohorts according to students, one finds a variety of reasons including learning with an unchanging group of students (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000), peer support, mutual respect, and lasting relationships



(Norris, Barnett, Basom, & Yerkes, 1996) as well as a safe and trusting environment created by the structure (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2003). However, in considering these reasons, one notices that the reasons that appear most frequently are those associated with the social well-being of the group. With far less frequency, students report aspects such as the opportunity to learn from colleagues in the K-12 education community (Milstein, 1995) and feeling that they learn more from discussions with each other than the content covered in classes (Barnett et al., 2000). This causes one to raise the question, how do cohort members use the structure, as a learning community or as a support group for student members?

A variety of studies have reported that data gathered about students' perceptions of the cohort revolve primarily around both the positive and negative social aspects of the group. Students have reported liking cohort members and the support they receive from them (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). Groups have also reported not dealing easily or at all with challenging the ideas of one another, taking risks intellectually, or examining differing ideas amongst group members. Instead, conflict avoidance was employed as the method to address this (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Students also reported that the structure limited making social connections to others and a feeling of cliquishness pervading the group as well as some members dominating the group (Shapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001).

Additionally, other negative social effects were found (Barnett et al., 2000; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006; Shapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001) to result within and from the cohort structure as it can exaggerate the influence of the strongest students in the group and minimize students who are more introspective or unwilling to take on leadership roles. The issue of group think is also a concern in these groups. Overall in these studies, intellectual stimulation or thinking about educational issues in new ways was not reported. Instead, confusion about or the

division of labor for assignments were the only references to the learning community aspect of the cohort structure. Even when students reported aspects of the cohort structure they found to be negative, they were related to social reasons, not academic reasons. Overwhelmingly, students' reasons for viewing the experience positively were related to social aspects of the group. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to explore the cohort structure of one university's doctoral educational leadership program to determine if students use it primarily as a learning community or as a social support group.

### **Problem Statement**

An ever increasing number of leadership preparation programs are currently using the cohort model as a method of delivery. Research has consistently shown that students report having had a positive experience with this model. They have identified elements of the structure that worked well for them such as the development of supportive social bonds amongst members, peer support, and lasting relationships. However, research has not explored with any real frequency how students actually use the structure. While the main focus of the use of the cohort structure is to produce mutual intellectual and academic stimulation of members through the sharing and critiquing of ideas, resources, and materials, these factors are not the primary reasons members report when reflecting on their positive cohort experience. This study will explore how students in a doctoral educational leadership cohort use the structure, as a learning community or as a method of social support.

### **Research Questions**

How do cohort members experience the cohort structure of the doctoral educational leadership program?

1. What are cohort members' attitudes toward the cohort?

2. Do attitudes toward the cohort structure vary by student characteristics?
3. How does the cohort structure support students while in the program?
4. Does the cohort structure produce mutual academic and intellectual stimulation of members (through the critiquing and sharing of materials, ideas, and resources) or does it foster an atmosphere of social dependence and stifle intellectual growth?

### **Significance**

This study contributes to the field of education from both a theoretical and practical standpoint. Theoretically, it broadens understanding for the academic community regarding the use of the cohort structure at the doctoral level. A study examining student use of the structure will help to create a clearer overall picture of the functionality of this initiative. Additionally, this study will lead to the enhancement of existing and future programs as well as the overall sharing of ideas.

In regards to a practical standpoint, it has been estimated that more than 50% of educational leadership programs currently employ the cohort model in their preparation programs (Barnett et al., 2000). With such a high number of programs using this structure, it is necessary and practical for cohort organizers at the university doctoral level, particularly of the university being studied, to understand how doctoral students use the structure, either as a social support system or as a method to develop and strengthen their skills and knowledge as an educational leader. Armed with this knowledge, university organizers can then begin to examine and restructure their own cohort models to increase the academic learning and intellectual stimulation that is occurring or work to make the two elements mutually benefit one another.

## **Methodology/Overview**

Through the use of academic databases, the researcher searched for journal articles from peer-reviewed sources that pertain to issues relating to the use of student cohorts in doctoral educational leadership programs. In particular, the search was made for studies related to students' perceptions of their participation and the cohort and how it was used by students.

Although this study employed primarily a naturalistic inquiry research approach for the collection and analysis of data, it initially utilized a survey research approach. This approach allowed the researcher to acquire numerical data from a larger group of cohort participants. A university located in a southeastern state was purposively chosen for this study so as to examine its current cohort program in the doctoral level educational leadership program. The researcher requested and gained approval from the university's Institutional Review Board to survey and interview students in the department's cohort program. After being granted permission, the researcher purposively selected all cohort groups that have participated in the program to complete the online survey. The survey allowed the researcher to obtain descriptive data and percentages in regards to doctoral students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the cohort model as well as how they use(d) it personally. Additionally, during the survey all students were asked if they were willing to participate in a focus group, and if so, to email the researcher indicating this.

The survey link was emailed to participants on December 10, 2010 and a follow-up reminder was sent on December 24, 2010. Focus groups were conducted in January and February 2011. After the survey was closed, all responses were calculated and reported as frequencies and percentages using a statistical data analysis computer program, PASW 18.0.3. In order to gather qualitative data, focus groups were utilized and all were recorded with the participant's consent.

The researcher used the same interview guide with all focus groups and questions were asked in the same order. Other than demographic questions, all others are of an open-ended nature. Focus group interviews were then transcribed and the data were analyzed. The researcher then searched the data for emerging themes and patterns.

### **Limitations**

The educational leadership program at one southeastern university was purposively chosen for this study by the researcher. Additionally, all survey and focus group participants were purposively chosen by the researcher. Thus, this setting is unique to this study. As a result, data that were collected in this study cannot be generalized to a larger population of educational leadership cohort programs or cohort programs in general. The researcher also relied on participant self-report during data collection that could have possibly affected the findings of the study.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is organized in the following manner. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature concerning the cohort model and its historical development, positive and negative attributes associated with the use of the cohort model, and the theoretical framework used for data analysis. Chapter 3 describes in detail the methods used in the study. First, survey and naturalistic inquiry research are described and why both necessary to this study. Then, how the researcher gained access to the sample and a description of the sample are provided. The methods used for data collection and data analysis for both survey and naturalistic inquiry research are then detailed. Finally, consideration is given to validity and the limitations of the study. Chapter 4 provides the quantitative data results of the survey and the qualitative data results from the focus group interviews.

## Definitions

Within this study, terms are utilized that the reader may not be familiar with or are subject to interpretation. As a method to minimize confusion about key terms, the following definitions are provided.

*Cohort* - “A group of about 10-25 students who begin a program of study together, proceed together through a series of developmental exercises in the context of that program of study, and end the program at approximately the same time” (Barnett and Muse, 1993, p. 401).

*Fluid or Open Cohort* - A program in which students are not required to all begin a program at the same time. Instead, they can enter and exit the group at any time.

*Closed Cohort* - A program in which students all begin at the same time and take all classes together in a predetermined order.

*Focus Group Interview* - “A purposefully sampled group of people is interviewed, rather than each person individually. By creating a social environment in which group members are stimulated by one another’s perceptions and ideas, the researcher can increase the quality and richness of data through a more efficient strategy than one-on-one interviewing” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 360).

*Learning Community* - Face-to-face groups of students and related faculty members.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of the literature relating to the use of the cohort structure in educational leadership programs presents several areas of exploration, specifically how students use the cohort structure. A review of research on the cohort model is provided as well as research on the history of the structure and how public K-12 education affected its resurgence in preparatory programs for school leaders. Finally, the positive and negative aspects associated with its use according to faculty and students are presented.

### **Cohort Model**

The term cohort has been defined in a variety of different ways that speak to aspects of it such as structure, the relationship between members, the time frame associated with it, etc. For the purposes of this study, the definition by Barnett and Muse (1993) seems to most adequately express the concept: “A group of about 10-25 students who begin a program of study together, proceed together through a series of developmental experiences in the context of that program of study, and end the program at approximately the same time” (p. 401). There are two types of cohorts primarily, the fluid cohort and the closed or pure cohort. A fluid cohort is one in which the experience is structured so students do not have to join the group at the beginning; instead, they can enter at other times throughout the course of the program and can exit at any time. A closed or pure cohort is one in which all members must join the program at the beginning of its inception and all classes are taken together as a group in a predetermined order (Barnett & Muse, 1993).

Although the cohort group is one that shares essentially all aspects of the program including faculty members, time, assignments and workload, space, and relationships, according to Yerkes et al. (1995), this does not necessarily create a cohort. Instead, in order for this group to be an effective cohort from which members benefit, there are many processes that must take place. Effective members must help one another, work collaboratively, and celebrate their successes, while at the same time helping one another to develop their individual skills and talents.

Research on group development suggests that interdependence occurs in three steps in order for the development of a successful cohort. First, group members must have a similar goal in common and the method for achieving this goal is understood by the group and acted upon. As a result, the group develops cohesion amongst its members and the likelihood of success is increased (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). The next level of interdependence amongst the group occurs when members influence one another through their social interactions. Finally, group members must be allowed to engage in learning opportunities as a group as well as on an individual basis. If these factors are present, the likelihood of a cohort developing successfully is much greater (Yerkes et al., 1995).

### **Historical Development of the Cohort Model**

The beginnings of cohorts can be traced back to the early 1950s. With funding from the Kellogg Foundation, the Foundations in Educational Administration Program was established at the University of Texas in 1952. Through this program, students had the opportunity to direct their own learning and relied upon faculty members as resources. Some of the major characteristics of this program were that members had the opportunity to engage in group and individual learning activities as well as working towards a common purpose and socially



interacting with one another. Other characteristics that made this first cohort grouping successful were that students perceived themselves as a community of learners and it provided opportunities for networking (Basom et al., 1997).

While the program at the University of Texas enjoyed success, other cohort programs that were attempted in the 1950s and 1960s did not experience similar outcomes. Their failure usually resulted from political and economic reasons. Cohorts were often established simply as a convenient method of delivery and developed as they needed to be. Also, over time, schools often lost their outside sources of funding to support the structure. It has also been implied by Basom et al. (1997) that cohorts were not successful during this time because they were in existence at a time that was not conducive to their development. The principal was the sole powerful leader and decision maker in a school in the late 1960s. The cohort model contradicted this view because of the emphasis on team work and group decision making. In a cohort, there is no one powerful leader or decision maker.

While many programs using the cohort model during this time failed, there are elements of each that have contributed to the cohort model as it is used today. The Cooperative Program in Educational Administration (CPEA) had a great deal of influence on the preparation of school leaders in the 1950's and 1960s. Lessons learned from this program include the practice of a core group of courses taught by many professors, full-time study, and the inclusion of professors from fields outside of education. Several prestigious schools such as Harvard, Columbia, and Stanford were centers of this program. Although, in 1959 CPEA eliminated funding, the seeds of using the cohort structure had been planted (Achilles, 1994).

In 1961, the Inter-University Project of IUP-II was sponsored at the University of Buffalo by the Ford Foundation. Interest in this program was generated by the Educational Professions

Development Act, PL 90-35 (later amended to PL 89-329). Stipends were offered to full-time students for participating in the program. Major components of the IUP-II program were interdisciplinary work, group-process work, full-time residencies, cooperation among universities, and the concept of “cohortness” or togetherness (Achilles, 1994). The main difference between this program and the CPEA program was that CPEA focused solely on the superintendent and the IUP-II program had a larger focus that included urban administrators, superintendents, principals, and agents of change.

In the following decade, Culbertson, Farquhar, Gaynor, and Shibles (1969) wrote the Culbertson Report, “Preparing Educational Leaders for the 1970’s.” This report, based upon a literature review and data from questionnaire responses, was directed toward superintendents and describes a 10-component framework that the authors advocated the preparation of school administrators should be based upon. At the time of this report, Culbertson was the Executive Director of the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA), which had been created from the CPEA. Thus, it is very likely that the superintendents surveyed in the Culbertson Report were also those who had been trained in UCEA or CPEA programs that employed the “cohort approach” (Culbertson et al., 1969, as cited in Hresko, 1998).

The National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (NCEE) released the report “Leader for America’s Schools” in 1987. The report, written by Griffiths, Forsyth and Stout, advocated the development of a National Policy Board to bring together administrators that had become less cohesive during the 1970s and 1980s. One of the main recommendations of this report was the creation and implementation of learning teams.

Shibles (1998), one of the authors of the Culbertson Report, wrote “School Leadership Preparation: A Preface for Action” in 1988. This report made many of the same

recommendations as the CPEA Program, the IUP-II Program, and the Culbertson Report. The following year, The National Policy for Educational Administration (1989) released a report, “Improving the Preparation for School Administrators: An Agenda for Reform” that also provided many of the same recommendations as previous reports. Additionally, it advocated the importance of a long-term relationship amongst professors and students.

Since 1986, the Danforth Foundation has awarded grants to 22 university administrator preparation programs for reformation and restructuring as well as funded leadership programs across the United States to improve the quality of education and preparation that administrative students were receiving. The primary aim of the program is to help future educational leaders understand the connection between knowledge, theory, and practice. At the university level, the Danforth programs are known as the Danforth Program for the Preparation of School Principals. Even though the Danforth Foundation does not require the use of the cohort model, if a university accepts their funding they must implement the Danforth guidelines that make the use of cohort grouping necessary (Maher, 2005). The average size of cohorts at Danforth program universities is 30 and the program works to accommodate the work schedules of students by offering classes later in the afternoon, in the evening or at night and during the weekend. Seventy-five percent of Danforth students are enrolled in master’s, doctoral or educational specialist programs. It has also been noted that of the universities using the Danforth program, all agree that the cohort model is an effective tool to use in an educational leadership program (Achilles, 1994).

### **Re-Introduction of the Cohort Model at the University Level**

After the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the American educational system was under attack. The report charged that the United

States was in danger of falling behind other countries because its educational system lacked rigorousness and instead settled for mediocrity in students (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This report has been credited with beginning a reform movement in education that ultimately occurred in three waves according to Clark (2001). Involved in the first wave was the setting and upholding of higher standards for students and teachers. More rigorous standards for entering the field of teaching were created as well as in requirements for graduation for students. There was also an increase in testing of students to ensure their progress.

The next wave of reform in education was referred to as site-based decision making or school-based management. Ultimately, a more localized decision-making model was implemented in schools. The third wave of reform in education was known as the school choice movement. The charter school movement and school vouchers for private schools were developed during this time. Both of these options were meant to introduce the element of competition into the public school system as well as to offer other options to the existing public school system (Clark, 2001).

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) increasingly has influenced additional reform in the public education system. It has resulted in an increase in testing of students in grades K-12 and the introduction of rewards and punishments to schools based on their improvement or failure. Additionally, many states have responded to this with the creation of new frameworks of curriculum and accountability laws that are based on the standards of learning. Standards-based licensing for school administrators and teachers has also been incorporated into this reform (NCLB, 2001).

According to Clark (2001), in reaction and response to the many waves of reform that were affecting the field of education, preparation programs for school administrators at the

university level also began to restructure themselves so as to be ready to deal with the reforms that were required to move forward. In order to ensure that future school leaders were adequately prepared to work within the present field of education, universities began to create and implement programs to meet this need. One of the programs that has increasingly been used in recent years is the cohort model. By using this approach, the skills that a future school leader needs can be addressed in that students have opportunities to experience different roles such as instructional leader or discussion facilitator in real situations. They have the chance to improve their abilities and skills to work with others, develop a greater appreciation for diversity amongst group members, and continue to adhere to high performance standards while remaining in the safety and comfort of the cohort group.

### **Attributes Associated With the Use of the Cohort Model**

#### **Positive Attributes**

There are a variety of reasons cited advocating the use of the cohort model. According to Seifert and Mandzuk (2006), cohorts promote the forming of supportive social connections between members and it is hoped that these ties will endure after the cohort is dissolved. Cohorts also aim to produce mutual academic and intellectual stimulation through the critiquing and sharing of materials, ideas, and resources. From the perspective of the university, it is easier to organize and facilitate cohort students because they all take the same classes at the same time.

It has also been noted by other researchers that the cohort is more than just a model to deliver a program. Instead, it is considered to be a learning model for more mature or adults students (Barnett & Muse, 1993). Adult students tend to have stronger internal motivation and be more self-directed. Thus, it has been argued that the cohort model engages members in a way that is more meaningful than a more traditional structure. Not only have adult learners had more

experiences and thus a larger frame of reference to base new learning on, they are also driven to learn about things that are meaningful to them and that are related to their work lives.

Upon further exploration of the positive aspects associated with cohorts, one finds a variety of reasons including learning a common program of study with an unchanging group of students (Barnett et al., 2000), peer support, mutual respect, and lasting relationships (Norris et al., 1996) as well as a safe and trusting environment created by the structure. The well-developed sense of community is felt by members of the cohort and they attribute it to the fixed sequence of classes they all take together (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2003).

Other positive aspects concerning the use of the cohort model have been researched by Maher (2005). Faculty members view cohorts favorably because the courses that will be offered are clearly established, typically several semesters in advance. This aids professors in “planning for teaching assignments, course preparation, and coordination of instruction across courses” (p. 196). Students have also reported favorable reviews of the cohort model because they know well in advance their course of study as well as having a specific timeline in which the program will be completed. Administrators also find cohort programs attractive because the expectation is that members will remain enrolled through out the program. This predictability, in turn, helps to steady revenue expenditures and sources of funding. Administrators can depend on cohort groups as a source of funding in future planning (Maher, 2005).

Finally, cohort members have reported their appreciation of the support they feel from fellow members as well as that the structure allows them the chance to learn from colleagues in similar professional environments (Milstein, 1995). Female cohort members in particular have been found to deem the interpersonal aspects of the cohort as more important than their male counterparts (Twale & Kochan, 2000).

## **Negative Attributes**

However, not all facets of the structure have been found to be positive. There are a variety of negative aspects that have been associated with the use of the cohort model as well. The two main areas of concern can be divided into concerns pertaining to faculty and concerns pertaining to students.

Faculty members who are involved in the cohort delivery method express dissatisfaction and problems with this approach. The direct influence cohorts have on faculty members can be troubling. Faculty members have expressed frustration with cohort students demanding more from them than students do in a more traditional program. These students are also more likely to challenge traditional instructional methods and the relevance of the curriculum and content. They often feel that there is no connection between what they are being taught and how it will apply to their future positions as school leaders. As a result, tension often occurs between the cohort students and the faculty (Barnett et al., 2000).

An additional issue in relation to the curriculum is that it can be affected and altered from the development of knowledge for each individual member of the cohort to the development of a group knowledge base. In this instance, rather than students learning to benefit themselves and strengthen and expand lacking areas of knowledge, the skills of the group as a whole are developed instead. This can in turn dilute the individual student's academic program (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006).

Furthermore, faculty members also express concern that the cohort can be less than successful in personal development and individuality of students. A study conducted by Seifert and Mandzuk (2006) found that several participants indicated in interviews that there were issues that were immensely important to them as individuals and professionals but were not made

apparent to the cohort as it seemed they were deemed unimportant by the group. The researchers expressed concern that instances such as this may result in not only a reduction in members' commitment to the program but also in the development of their confidence about themselves as future leaders.

In regards to academic growth, it has been found that when any comments were made pertaining to academics, it appeared that the focus was on confusion regarding assignments and not on the content itself. Students typically solicited help from one another in regards only to the clarification of assignments. Seifert and Mandzuk (2006) found that even in these situations, discussion about perceived ambiguity of assignments was confined because members often relied on one cohort member to clarify the intent of the assignment.

The other types of academic discussions that took place were those related to the division of assignments as a method to lessen the workload on individual students, particularly in group work. Although one of the foundations upon which cohorts are based is cooperative group work (Basom et al., 1997), group members often divided up group assignments so that each member was only responsible for a portion of the whole group assignment, rather than working together as a whole to accomplish it and thus receive the most benefit from it (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). The researchers pointed to the willingness of the students to cut corners in this manner as a sign of disrespect for a portion of their assignments. Faculty members felt that because students saw this work as not necessarily intellectual, it was not worth their time. The goal was simply to complete the work with as little effort as possible.

In a related aspect of this, Seifert and Mandzuk (2006) raised the issue that the tendency of students to only talk about the directions and procedures for assignments and not the substance of them may indicate the importance that members gave to positive social



relationships. Students possibly did not feel comfortable challenging classmates about assignments and the way they chose to do them or wanted to be an accepted member of the group and did what the majority of the class did. Thus, they put aside their deeper academic learning in favor of the social aspect of the cohort.

Another issue that faculty members have noted arising in situations in which a traditional on-campus program exists alongside a cohort program of the same focus is conflict between the two different groups. Students in the more traditional program express feeling as though they are second-class citizens because they perceive the cohort students to be receiving resources and opportunities for learning that are not available to them (Reynolds, 1993).

Additionally, faculty members involved in cohorts do not always sense that cohort members are receiving the best possible education for a variety of reasons. One of the major issues noted is time (Barnett et al., 2000). Time is a factor that has often been noted in limiting cohort students from getting the most from their experience and submitting their best work (Reynolds, 1993). Faculty members have also noted issues with a watering down of the curriculum because cohort students may be taught less theory because of time constraints, etc. There may also be issues with grade inflation and the group being dominated by a few students while the rest are observers (Barnett et al., 2000).

A final issue that can arise for faculty results from a division between those faculty members' teaching within the cohort and those who are not. Using the cohort model can increase faculty members' workload in that they are often working with and teaching on campus classes as well as cohort students. Also, the amount of time invested in teaching a cohort group is increased as well which is typically attributed to issues like travel time (Barnett et al., 2000). There is also the concern that cohort programs may drain traditional programs of resources,

funding and professor's time. In addition, they present scheduling issues and in some instances, can limit the number of students allowed to participate in either the cohort program or the traditional on campus program (Reynolds, 1993).

In relation to concerns pertaining to students, there are a number of factors to take into consideration. First, since cohort members ultimately spend a great deal of time with one another, personal conflicts can surface. As a result of this, the level of familiarity that develops among members of the group because of the amount of time they spend together, individual members' personal problems can become more evident in the group. In this same vein, some members of a cohort seem to be unable to conquer certain obstacles and their problems become problems for the group as a whole because of the cohesiveness of the group (Barnett et al., 2000).

There is also a level of competition academically that develops between cohort members. As a result of the level of familiarity within the group and the attitude of all for one and one for all that develops, members may feel an increased pressure to monitor members who are not performing as well. This attitude can also cause problems in a community of learners such as this, in that it can become overpowering and turn on a less productive group member or even a faculty member (Barnett et al., 2000).

A study by Teitel (1997) found that some cohort students felt that as a group, they were boxed into defined positions within the cohort. These students reported that they felt that the same students always dominated the discussion and the same students always remained silent. Overall, they tired of how this scenario played out again and again.

Another issue can result in terms of cohort members when one considers the peer pressure of the group. This pressure may not always be positive and can become or be perceived

by some members to be a negative influence and added stressor. Additionally, strong personalities can also become an issue in that they may attempt to control the group. Members can also feel that they must change to fit in the group or to force someone else to change who is having difficulty (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006).

A study conducted by Shapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) found other similarly negative social effects within and from the cohort structure. For instance, in their study, it was found that implementing the use of a cohort structure can exaggerate the influence of the strongest students in the group. Students who are more socially oriented and/or natural leaders were found to benefit most from the cohort but at a possible detriment to the rest of the group. They may quickly monopolize group discussions or class activities. They may come to speak for the rest of the class or it may be assumed by faculty that this is what they are doing when in reality they are not. However, other cohort members who are more introspective or unwilling to take on a leadership role may be afraid to speak out against this person for fear of alienating themselves from the group or being unable to defend themselves intellectually.

Additionally, Shapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) indicate that the more dominating members have also been found to acquire more power because of their continuous contact with the same group. This power can then be used to create negative norms that can be used to work against other cohort members or faculty.

Loosely related to this is the idea of the potential of the “one rotten apple syndrome” as indicated by Barnett et al. (2000). In a group structure such as a cohort in which members closely interact with each other for an extended period of time, any negative social action or interaction is hugely magnified. Thus, the problems or complaints of one group member can quickly become

the problems or complaints of the group that can, in turn, distract and detract from the learning that should be taking place within the group.

Finally, Shapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) also found that in bonding as a cohort, members can begin to behave and think alike. Expectations of developing similar philosophies or beliefs might be expected as a consequence of the closed nature of the cohort. Varying forms of peer pressure, either direct or indirect, can have the result of affecting the actions and ideas of the cohort. Members seem to no longer be individuals but instead are the cohort as one. These shared philosophies can in turn work against the goals that the cohort was originally created with.

### **Summary**

As a result of various waves of criticism about public K-12 education in the United States and the ensuing calls for reform, educational reform has become a primary focus. While the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has had tremendous impact on the public school system, the effects of this reform have not been limited to this area (Clark, 2001). At the university level, preparation programs for school administrators have been required to restructure and reform their programs. One method that is being used increasingly to meet this need is the implementation of the cohort model. This model facilitates the development of skills and abilities that an educational leader will need as a professional (Maher, 2005).

While research has found a variety of positive uses associated with the use of the cohort model as well as an overall positive rating of the experience by students (Barnett et al., 2000; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2003; Norris et al., 1996; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006), when one examines the research, it becomes obvious that students are most frequently reporting reasons associated with the social well-being of the group. Rarely do students cite reasons pertaining to

their academic development and growth, the foundation upon which the cohort model is founded on. Thus, what is missing from the research and therefore necessary to examine is how doctoral students in an educational leadership program use the cohort structure, as a social support group or as a learning community.

Therefore, this study was designed to address the following questions:

How do cohort members experience the cohort structure of the doctoral educational leadership program?

1. What are cohort members' attitudes toward the cohort?
2. Do attitudes toward the cohort structure vary by student characteristics?
3. How does the cohort structure support students while in the program?
4. Does the cohort structure produce mutual academic and intellectual stimulation of members (through the critiquing and sharing of materials, ideas, and resources) or does it foster an atmosphere of social dependence and stifle intellectual growth?

As the following chapter describes, this research study utilized the grounded theory approach to data collection that will provide data on cohort members' general experiences with the structure as well as an opportunity to delve into how they use the structure in developing their leadership skills. Data were collected from cohort member survey responses and reported as percentages and frequencies to determine areas of focus for focus group questions concerning how students used the cohort structure. This information may be added to existing literature on how doctoral students use the structure and university officials can begin to examine their own cohort models to increase its effectiveness for students.

## **CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Researcher Positionality**

I am currently an elementary school counselor and I have served in this role for several years. I decided to return to graduate school and begin a doctoral program in educational leadership. Through this program, I became a member of an official cohort that was composed of school administrators and teachers. Previously, in my master's program, I had participated in an unofficial cohort as the program was small and the same group of students took all the same classes together. Reflecting upon this group, I had had an extremely positive experience and felt that I truly grew as a counselor in developing my skills and abilities. A more secondary benefit of the program was that the group grew close and supported one another.

Toward the end of my second year in the doctoral program in educational leadership, and upon the dissolving of our cohort later, I began to reflect personally and with classmates about our experience. Time and time again, classmates stated how much they had appreciated the existence of the cohort because of the social support of the group, myself included. I found it to be incredibly helpful and useful to have a group of people who completely understood the oftentimes stressful and extremely time-consuming experience of which I was a part. I appreciated the support I received from my cohort-mates in terms of both academics and socially, that extended beyond the cohort during its lifespan and after its dissolution. I also mentioned how much I had learned from my classmates about their positions and because of this, about how a school operated from the administrative side and the reasoning that goes into

decisions administrators make. I did not often hear this as a primary reason from others given as to why they liked the cohort structure and the program.

Additionally, after the cohort had dissolved, I found it to be interesting in terms of how my classmates and I changed in terms of our cohort structure. I still felt as though I could rely on my classmates for almost anything I might need and still felt comfortable asking them for help if I needed it. I feel that my fellow cohort members would concur with this sentiment. We continued to remain in touch with one another as well. However, I also noticed how much some members struggled after the cohort had dissolved in moving forward with the dissertation process. Some seemed unable to make progress without having the structure of the cohort supporting them and allowed the rest of their lives to take over the space and time that had previously been allotted to the program. They no longer had classes to attend and deadlines to meet and this proved difficult for them. This further added to my interest in the topic as I pondered the degree to which students were relying on the supportive aspect of their cohort in relation to the importance they attributed the learning community aspect of it.

A review of the literature that I conducted during my research on the development and use of cohorts showed a similar pattern. It indicated that the design had been conceived originally as a way to make school leaders better leaders through the mutual development of the skills and abilities needed to be a leader. Upon closer examination of this research, I found that the high marks cohorts had received from students pertained primarily to reasons relating to social support.

Thus, I became interested in examining a current cohort program through the lens of how students actually used the cohort itself, particularly if they used it as a learning community as it was originally intended or as a social support group.

## **Research Design**

### **Mixed Methods Design**

This mixed-method research study was designed to examine how doctoral students utilize the cohort structure. Specifically, this study explored how students in a doctoral level cohort in an educational leadership program at one southeastern university experienced the cohort; if they found the structure useful; if it helped them complete the program; and if they perceived that it produced mutual intellectual and academic stimulation as a result of the structure and process; or if it enabled an atmosphere of social dependence on one another and as a result, stifled the intellectual growth and development of the students.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), survey and naturalistic inquiry research methods can be effectively combined in the same research project. Both types of research contribute to a variety of fields, and in this case, to the field of education. The combination of the two can also aid in the confirmation of themes or categories that may emerge upon data analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). However, most researchers and research projects rely primarily on one form of research and use the other as a more secondary means of data collection to ensure that as much data as possible is collected in the most appropriate manner and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, this study is a mixed-method study that employed both survey as well as naturalistic inquiry methods.

In regards to survey research, surveys were used and focus groups were utilized for qualitative data collection. Data on students' experiences with the cohort program was collected through the use of survey research methods. Through the use of purposeful selection, focus group participants were chosen from the group of survey respondents who indicated on the survey that they would be willing to be interviewed in greater depth concerning their experience



with the cohort structure. The focus group portion of the study served to conclude the collection of qualitative data.

This chapter reviews both research perspectives of the study, which is of a quantitative and qualitative nature, and explains why both are necessary to address these research questions. After providing a description of both types of research, the sample and data collection methods used are described as well as the data analysis used and the limitations of each approach.

**Survey research.** According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), there are several characteristics of survey research that make it distinctly different from naturalistic inquiry research. First, the role of logical positivism, the belief that a single reality exists with unchanging social facts, is what survey research is based upon. This is distinctly separate from the beliefs and feelings of individuals or participants. Second, in conducting survey research, the researcher is attempting to not only determine relationships but also to explain any causes of social change that may occur. With survey research, the researcher uses a pre-established design before collecting data. This design is then followed by the researcher throughout the course of data collection.

In order to reduce bias, error, and extraneous variables, the quantitative researcher uses a correlational or experimental design. The researcher also views the ideal role for him/herself in a survey research design as being removed or detached from the study. Finally, when conducting survey research, an attempt is being made to develop “universal, context-free generalizations” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 13). Thus, the findings of the study can be applied to any situation that is deemed similar to the study population.

An important piece of survey research is the use of descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics change a set of numbers or data gathered during a study into information that

characterizes or describes the group of participants. It is used to summarize and organize large quantities of numbers into meaningful information. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), descriptive statistics “portray and focus on what is with respect to the sample data” (p. 150). Thus, descriptive statistics are necessary and appropriate for the quantitative stage of this research study because it is a way to describe the participants of the study, members of the doctoral cohort, and help to focus on areas that need to be explored further during focus groups so as to gain the most data about how students use the cohort structure.

**Naturalistic inquiry.** According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), “. . . qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (p. 3). Creswell (2007) states that naturalistic inquiry research starts with assumptions made by the researcher and his/her worldview, and the study of a research problem that investigates the meaning that groups or individuals assign to a human or social problem. The qualitative researcher, in order to examine the problem, must collect data in a natural setting that takes into consideration the needs of the participants or places being studied. Data analysis must then occur in a manner such that, through induction, patterns or themes are established. Upon the final dissemination of the findings of the study, the voices of the participants and the reflexivity of the researcher are heard, and a detailed description and interpretation of the focus of the study is provided. In doing this, the research body about this particular area is expanded or further study is called for.

According to Creswell (2007), naturalistic inquiry research is conducted when a “complex, detailed understanding of the issue” (p. 40) is needed. The only way to capture the level of detail and information needed is through interviewing people directly in their natural

setting and permitting them to tell their story as they understand it, regardless of the opinions or views of the researcher that have developed as a result of the research. Naturalistic inquiry research is also utilized because one cannot separate the context—what participants say and the setting in which they say it. Thus, the researcher must understand both.

Naturalistic inquiry research is also used to expand upon survey research findings. Survey research can aid in finding links between theories or models but cannot explain the context in which participants responded, why they responded as they did, and what thoughts and beliefs governed their answers. Naturalistic inquiry research can do this (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, according to Creswell (2007), naturalistic inquiry research is utilized when previously developed theories do not encapsulate all aspects of the research problem that is being examined.

A naturalistic inquiry research approach was appropriate for this research study because previous research (Barnett et al., 2000; Barnett et al., 1993; Barnett & Muth, 2003; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2003; Milstein, 1995; Norris et al., 1996; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Shapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001) has already shown that the cohort structure is viewed favorably by student users. However, this research has not delved further into their reasons for why they rated the structure favorably and how this relates to how they use it. Furthermore, this research study expands upon an initial quantitative approach to determine the specific areas that needed to be focused on. The survey research showed those areas but did not explain why participants answered the way they did or the context of their answers.

### **Participants**

The southeastern university chosen for data collection was purposively selected as a result of its convenience to the researcher as well as the existence of several cohort groups in the

educational leadership program. As the researcher is currently affiliated with the university, it was also a convenient location to conduct the study. The university in which data was collected is a large-sized school that exists within a city with approximately 200,000 people. The student body at the university is approximately 32,000. The university houses both an academic campus and a medical school. At the time of the study, the educational leadership program had two current cohorts and six that have completed coursework and beyond. Seventy-five students in all past and present cohorts were sent the email invitation to complete the survey. Approval was gained from the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Commonwealth University before the study began (see Appendix A).

## **Data Collection**

### **Phase I: Survey**

The survey that was used to gather quantitative data about the cohort members was originally developed and used in a study by Ross, Stafford, Church-Pupke, and Bondy (2006) to ascertain students' perceptions of cohort membership. For the purposes of this study, the survey contains 38 closed response items with a 4-point Likert scale as well as five questions concerning demographics. The survey was used to measure student attitudes about their experience as a member of a cohort as well as to inform the focus group questions that were used in the interview portion of this study.

A scale to measure Agreeableness has been added to the aforementioned survey. The Big Five Inventory (BFI) was constructed by John, Donahue, and Kentle (1991) to meet the need for a short instrument that would measure the prototypical parts of the Big Five (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness) that were found to be common amongst those studying and measuring personality. The BFI inventory contains 44 items and is a

brief inventory that allows flexible and efficient assessment of those five dimensions in situations when a more differentiated measurement is not needed. The coefficient alpha reliability score of the BFI is .83 and the scale measuring agreeableness showed a mean validity of .92 (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Two additional scales were added to the study to measure students' feelings of belongingness and community of learners. The scales were originally developed as part of a study by Poimbeauf (2003, 2004) to measure cohort members' attitudes toward the cohort. In regards to the community of learners scale, the seven items produced a range of .600 to .809 and an eigenvalue of 4.55. A high degree of reliability for the scale was evidenced by a Cronbach alpha of .890 and a standardized alpha of .895. The networking scale produced a range of .615 to .852 and an eigenvalue of 4.02. Again, a high degree of reliability for the networking scale was evidenced by a Cronbach alpha of .871 and a standardized alpha of .871. The scales designed to measure students' feelings of belongingness and community of learners will serve to inform the interview questions as well as to determine if any of the nine factors cluster together.

Additional questions were also added to the survey asking participants to rate how much they liked their fellow cohort members as well as how being a member of the cohort has affected their success and feelings of support.

The survey was hosted online by SurveyMonkey (see Appendix B). An email invitation was sent to all students who have participated in all cohorts in the doctoral educational leadership program at this university, both current and past students (see Appendix C). An email reminder was sent to participants twice at intervals 14 days and 11 days (see Appendix D). The survey was closed by the researcher after a period of 30 days. The survey contained questions pertaining to demographic information about participants as well as questions about their

experience in the cohort program, their experiences with other members, and how they feel the structure has been used by themselves as well as other members. The survey also contained a letter of endorsement from the director of the Ph.D. program in educational leadership lending his support to the research project and requesting that students participate in the survey.

## **Phase II: Focus Groups**

After the online survey was closed and the data analyzed, the researcher contacted participants through email who indicated they would be willing to participate in an interview (see Appendix E). From the responses, the researcher selected all participants who responded to the request as a matter of convenience. Eighteen participants responded, and ultimately 15 participated. The three who did not participate had reasons of illness or scheduling issue. The researcher had anticipated three focus groups of 5 participants each and was able to achieve this through the total number of participants who were able to participate.

As participants may have been divulging information concerning a cohort of a school and program in which some may still be enrolled, some of which may be of a sensitive nature, the researcher asked participants to sign informed consent agreements so as to guarantee that all participants remained anonymous as well as to ensure ethical treatment of all participants (see Appendix F).

To allow participants to respond freely and openly, questions were asked in an open-ended and standardized manner. The sequence of questions and how they were to be worded was previously determined by the researcher (see Appendix G). The focus group questions were designed to specifically delve further into data collected by the online survey. The questions focused on social support, sharing of information and resources, and usefulness of structure.

The researcher asked all participants the interview questions in the same order and used the same wording. The researcher veered from this from time to time only when the participants, in the course of answering another question, answered an additional question as well. Additionally, the researcher veered from this format when the participants indicated another aspect of the subject they wanted to discuss.

Focus groups were conducted during January and February 2011, twice at the school of the researcher and once at a school where one of the group participants worked due to issues of centrality of participants. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes to an hour. The researcher digitally recorded the focus groups and took simple notes during each interview. The focus groups were then transcribed for further analysis and copies were offered to the interview participants for review.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Phase I: Quantitative Data**

The program PASW 18.0.3, a statistical analysis computer program, was used to tabulate survey responses. Descriptive statistics were used to report the demographic portion of the survey: the gender of cohort members, the cohort of which they are a member, age, years in education, and school level in which they are employed. Tests of difference such as t-tests, analysis of variance, etc. were conducted to determine if there were any differences by demographics (age, gender, etc.). In regards to data about students' experiences in the cohort, scores were averaged across all questions to gain an average score for each cohort member's overall attitude. By asking cohort members to indicate in which cohort they were a member in

the demographic section of the survey, the researcher was able to look for differences across cohorts in relation to each participant's average score about his/her cohort experience.

## **Phase II: Qualitative Data**

Throughout the qualitative data collection process, field notes were taken by the researcher that included "emerging analytic insights about the behavior" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 99) as well as the researcher's observation comments that indicated possible themes to explore upon data analysis.

A grounded theory approach was conducted in the analysis of interview data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Harry, Sturges, & Klinger, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory is a theoretical approach first developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 through the publication of *The Discovery of Founded Theory*. In using grounded theory, the researcher engages in a process of "constant comparison" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using this process, the researcher moves back and forth between the data. In doing so, a process of coding occurs followed by the development of conceptual categories and eventually theory development (Harry et al., 2005).

The first stage in the process of using grounded theory is referred to as open coding. In doing so, the researcher identifies events and names in the data and constantly engages in the process of comparing these pieces to one another to determine what belongs or sticks together (Harry et al., 2005). Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe this as "the basic, defining rule for the constant comparative method" in that as a researcher codes an incident, he/she should also compare it with all other prior data so that this "soon starts to generate theoretical properties of the category" (p. 106).



The next stage in this process is referred to by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as axial coding in which the discrete codes are grouped by conceptual categories that exhibit similarities among codes. The term axial coding is used to illustrate the idea of grouping or clustering the codes around specific points or “axes” of intersection. As the researcher takes part in axial/categorizing coding, these concepts are being teased out through the viewpoint of the researcher who is also forming meaning from the data.

The third analytical stage is referred to by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as selective coding. By this stage, the researcher working with the code clusters to determine how they will interact with one another as well as the account they will relate. According to Strauss and Corbin (1996) the researcher “constructs. . . a set of relational statements that can be used to explain, in a general sense, what is going on” (p. 145).

Harry et al. (2005) refer to this stage as the thematic level, alluding to the underlying stories or messages, the themes of the categories. As the researcher attempts to understand the interconnections between the themes, he/she starts to develop a theory. As an “overarching theoretical scheme” or “central category” is developed, Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that the development of theory becomes a “search for consistency and logic” (p. 156) that will blend together corresponding and opposing pieces of evidence. To refine the theory, the researcher attempts to further develop underdeveloped categories, examines disparate data, and accounts for discrepancies. Strauss and Corbin (1998) encapsulate the process by saying, “Integration occurs over time, beginning with the first steps in analysis and often not ending until the final writing” (p. 161).

## **Trustworthiness/Validity**

There are a variety of methods to achieve trustworthiness in a research study. The use of triangulation is an important way to do this. Triangulation is the cross-validation of areas such as data collection strategies, data sources, theoretical schemes and time periods. For the purposes of this research study, the researcher conducted methods triangulation which involves comparing the findings from the survey and the focus groups for consistency (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Another method that was used to reduce possible threats to validity is continuous feedback received from members of the dissertation committee. A section regarding researcher positionality has also been included in this study so as to inform the reader of the researcher's background in relation to student cohorts in a doctoral educational leadership program. All discrepant data was analyzed throughout the study so as to check for variants to the emerging categories and themes of the study. Finally, all focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed and given to the participants for review so as to reduce error in data collected.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations of this study. In regards to the survey research portion of the study, there are several limitations to take into consideration. First, the researcher is relying on self-reports by participants who may not be as objective about their experience as possible. Second, the researcher completed the program being studied as a member of a cohort. The university was purposively chosen by the researcher because of convenience. Thus, other universities may have had cohort programs that were larger or more developed and may have yielded more information. The researcher did not establish a personal relationship with most participants until the interview portion of the study, which may have affected who did or did not

respond to the interview request. Thus, as only one university program was studied, it is inappropriate to make generalizations to other university cohort programs.

In regards to the naturalistic inquiry portion of this study, one must also take into consideration the following limitations. The findings and interpretations of the data resulting from this study are limited to the university cohort program being studied because of the context-bound nature of qualitative research as well as the unique qualities of the university's educational leadership program. Additionally, data collected from focus groups are limited to the interview participants. Any themes or categories that are discovered through data analysis are specific to the participant him/herself. Furthermore, the focus group data were not discussed or cross-checked with faculty members of the program nor with student members of the various cohorts.

### **Summary**

This research study, of a mixed-method nature, was developed to examine how student members of a cohort in educational leadership at a southeastern university use the cohort structure. Specifically, the research focused on the students' use of the cohort as a learning community and whether they felt they became better leaders as a result, or if they used it primarily as a social support group. Initially, survey research methods were used to gather statistical data. Then, naturalistic inquiry methods were employed to gather information-rich data. A justification for the use of each approach was discussed as well as the strengths and weaknesses of each research approach.

### **Survey Development: Establishing Reliability and Validity**

The factor analyses were performed on the survey scale questions, numbers 6 through 12 (numbers 1 through 5 pertained to demographic information), to indicate if the scales were valid

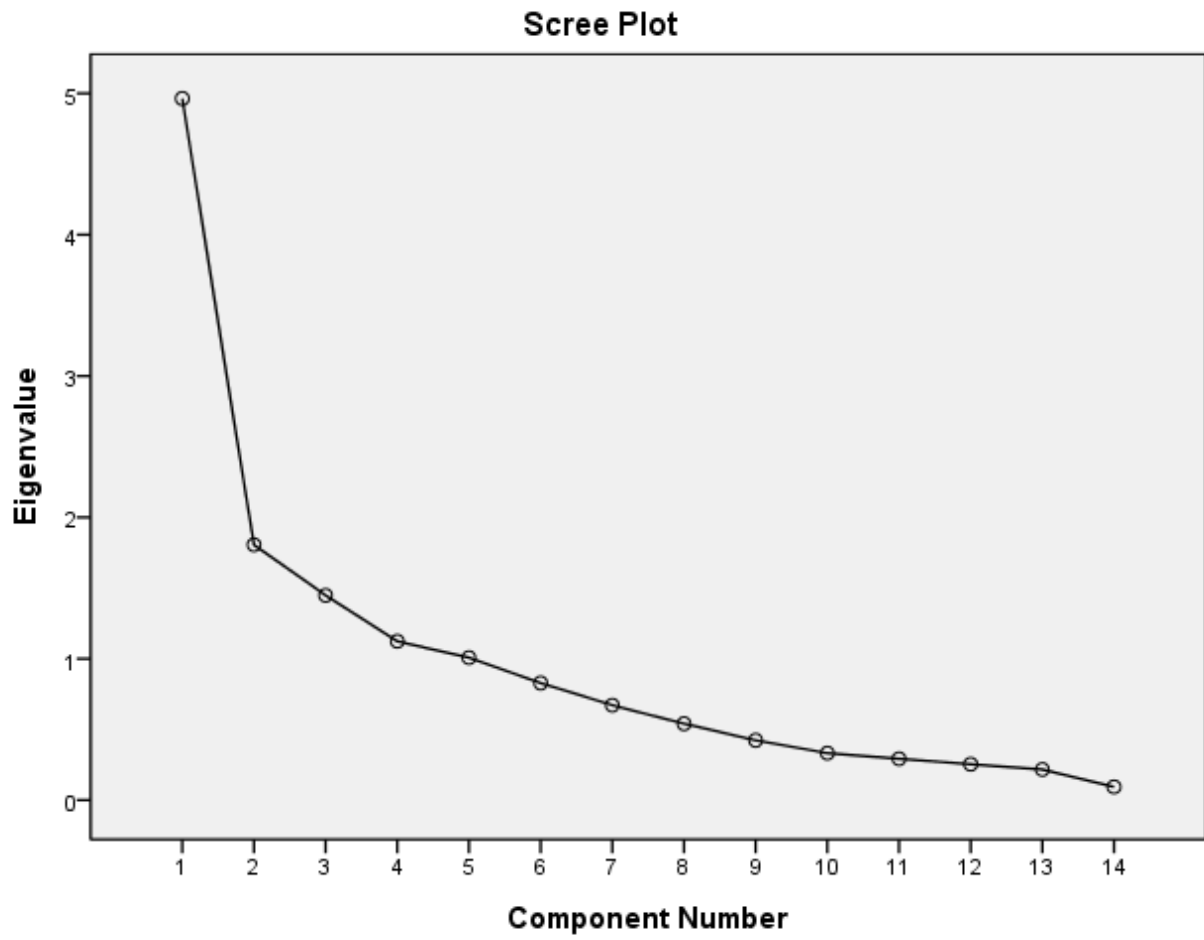
and reliable. That is, a confirmatory analysis was performed to confirm that the scales were measuring what they purport to measure (i.e., agreeableness, belonging, etc.) and that they would do so consistently.

The factor analyses were performed in PASW 18.0.3 using the Principal Component Extraction method. With each factor analysis, Eigenvalues over 1 and scree plots were requested with each factor analysis. A Varimax rotation was utilized and the rotated solution was displayed. If an absolute coefficient value was less than .60, it was suppressed. The reliability analyses were performed using PASW 18 and the Alpha Model.

The survey used in this study was constructed with four groups of questions. Each grouping of questions was intended to capture data regarding varying aspects of the cohort experience. The first grouping of questions asked students to consider their overall attitude toward the cohort experience. This set of questions originated in a study by Ross et al. (2006) that examined students' attitudes toward their cohort experience. The second grouping of questions was based on an Agreeableness scale (John & Srivastava, 1999) and was intended to examine students' feelings regarding trust within the cohort between students. The third grouping of questions focused on students' perceptions regarding opportunities for professional networking the cohort provided. The fourth grouping of questions focused on members' perceptions of themselves as members of a community of learners.

### **First Grouping of Survey Questions: General Attitudes Toward Cohort**

This section of the survey contained 14 questions pertaining to students' experiences as a member of a cohort. This set of questions originated in a study by Ross et al. (2006) that examined students' attitudes towards their cohort experience. The scree plot in Figure 1 shows that there were two different component factors operating within these questions. The rotated



*Figure 1.* First grouping scree plot

component matrix in Table 1 reveals that questions 6D, 6E, 7C, and 7F did not load on either of the two component factors. These questions concern cohort membership discouraging the voicing of opinions that may cause difficulty within the group, the cohort structure encouraging the development of cliques, cohort membership helping members learn how to negotiate and compromise, and interpersonal relationships within the cohort distracting members from success academically. As these questions are not essential to measuring cohort experience, they have been eliminated.

Two factors emerged from this grouping. The first factor related to students and was named the *General Cohort Experience Factor*. The questions that address this factor are questions 6A, 6C, 7A, 7D, 7E, and 7G.

- Q6A. Being a member of this cohort helps me to feel a part of the program.
- Q6C. Being a member of my cohort contributes to my academic success.
- Q7A. Being a member of my cohort has provided me the confidence to participate in discussion and speak my mind without fear.
- Q7D. The cohort system has enabled me to develop relationships with faculty and peers that will serve as a resource in my professional life.
- Q7E. The cohort system tends to exaggerate the significance of minor student dissatisfaction.
- Q7G. Overall, my experience with the cohort system has been very positive.

Question 7E was removed from this loading as it had a much lower score on the Rotated Component Matrix than the rest of the questions that comprised this loading. More importantly, when it was removed, the overall reliability for the factor was greatly increased.

Table 1

*First Grouping Rotated Component Matrix*

	<u>Rotated Component Matrix<sup>a</sup></u>				
	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Q6A	.795				
Q6B		-.649			
Q6C	.794				
Q6D			.877		
Q6E				.940	
Q6F		.820			
Q6G		.712			
Q7A	.642				.408
Q7B		.686			
Q7C					.933
Q7D	.704				
Q7E	.484			.439	-.438
Q7F			.707		
Q7G	.579	.492			

<sup>a</sup>Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

The reliability analysis found in Table 2 shows that the alpha for General Cohort Experience is .833 (with the removal of Question 7E).

Table 2

*First Grouping Reliability Statistics: General Cohort Experience*

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
.833	5

The second factor is related to students' feelings concerning trust within the cohort between students and has been named the *Trust Within the Cohort Factor*. The questions that address this factor are 6B, 6F, 6G, 7B, and 7G.

- Q6B. I am an outsider in my cohort.
- Q6F. The cohort system encourages deeper discussion of course content.
- Q6G. The cohort system encourages and supports the free expression of varying viewpoints.
- Q7B. My cohort fosters the development of trust and respect among members.
- Q7G. Overall, my experience with the cohort system has been very positive.

Question 6B was reversed in this factor because it was asked in a negative manner and all other questions in this factor were asked positively. With its reversal, the overall reliability of the factor was greatly increased.

The reliability analyses found in Table 3 provide the alpha for the second factor, and detail the value of each of the component questions to the alpha level for the factor that was found in this grouping.



Table 3

*First Grouping Reliability Analysis: Trust Within the Cohort*

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
.835	5

## Second Grouping of Survey Questions: Agreeableness

This section of survey questions pertained to how survey participants viewed themselves in terms of agreeability. The scree plot in Figure 2 shows that there is one component factor operating among these questions.

Table 4 shows the two possible factors that loaded from this grouping of questions. Two factors emerged from this grouping; however, it was presented in the literature as a single factor that measured agreeableness. Initially, an Agreeableness scale was included to ensure that participant responses were not positive simply because they were agreeable people. The scale was supposed to hold up as a single factor but did not. Thus, the researcher decided to

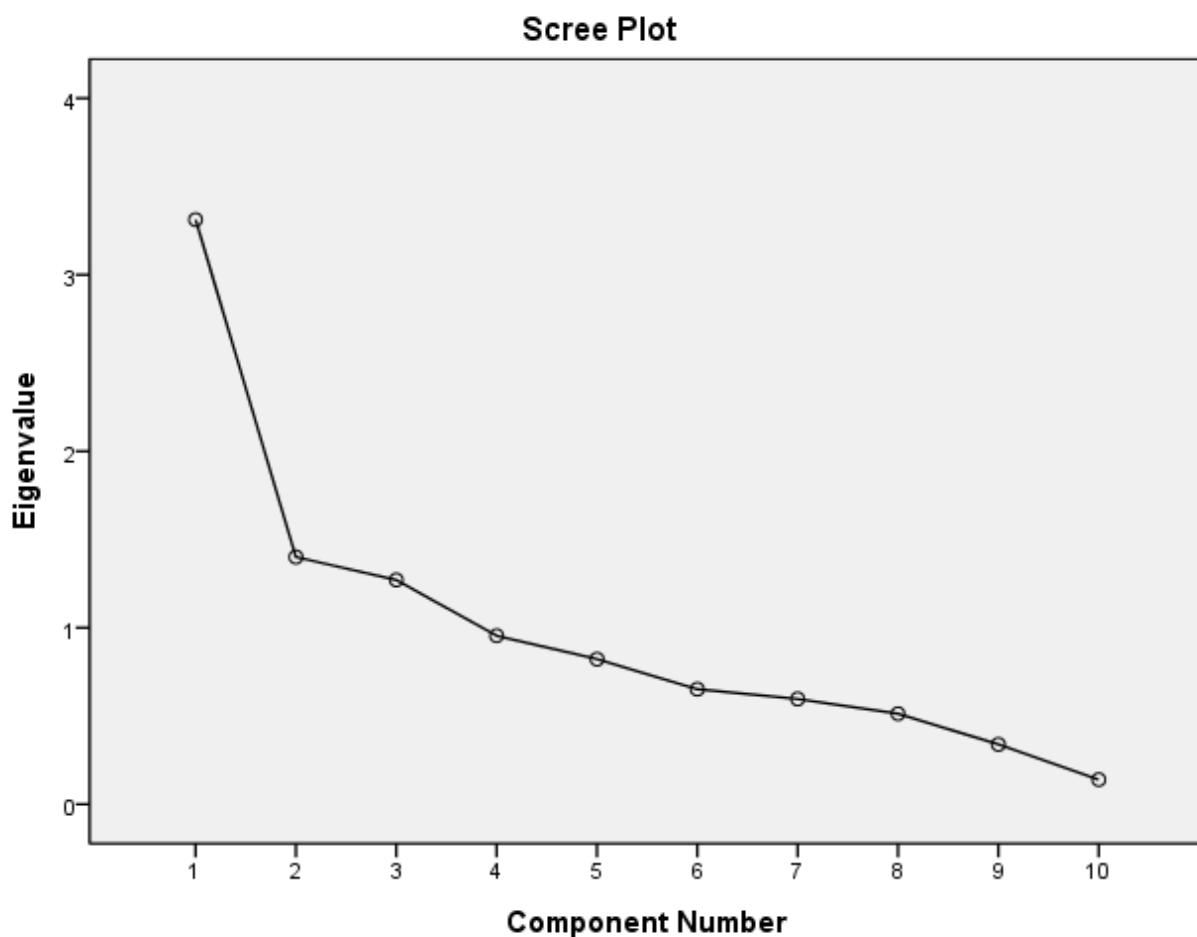


Figure 2. Second grouping scree plot

Table 4

*Second Grouping Rotated Component Matrix*

	<u>Rotated Component Matrix<sup>a</sup></u>		
	Component		
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Q8A		.744	
Q8B			.839
Q8C		.538	.685
Q8D	.468		.482
Q8E		.578	
Q9A		.714	
revQ9B	.695		
REVQ9C	.537		
REVQ9D	.774		
REVQ9E	.713		

<sup>a</sup>Rotation converged in 13 iterations.

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation method: Varimax with Kiser Normalization.

eliminate it for two reasons. One, it did not hold up as a single factor which made it difficult to include in the analysis. Two, the researcher decided not to pursue it because enough variability was established in the other scales so agreeableness was not an issue in terms of participants' responses.

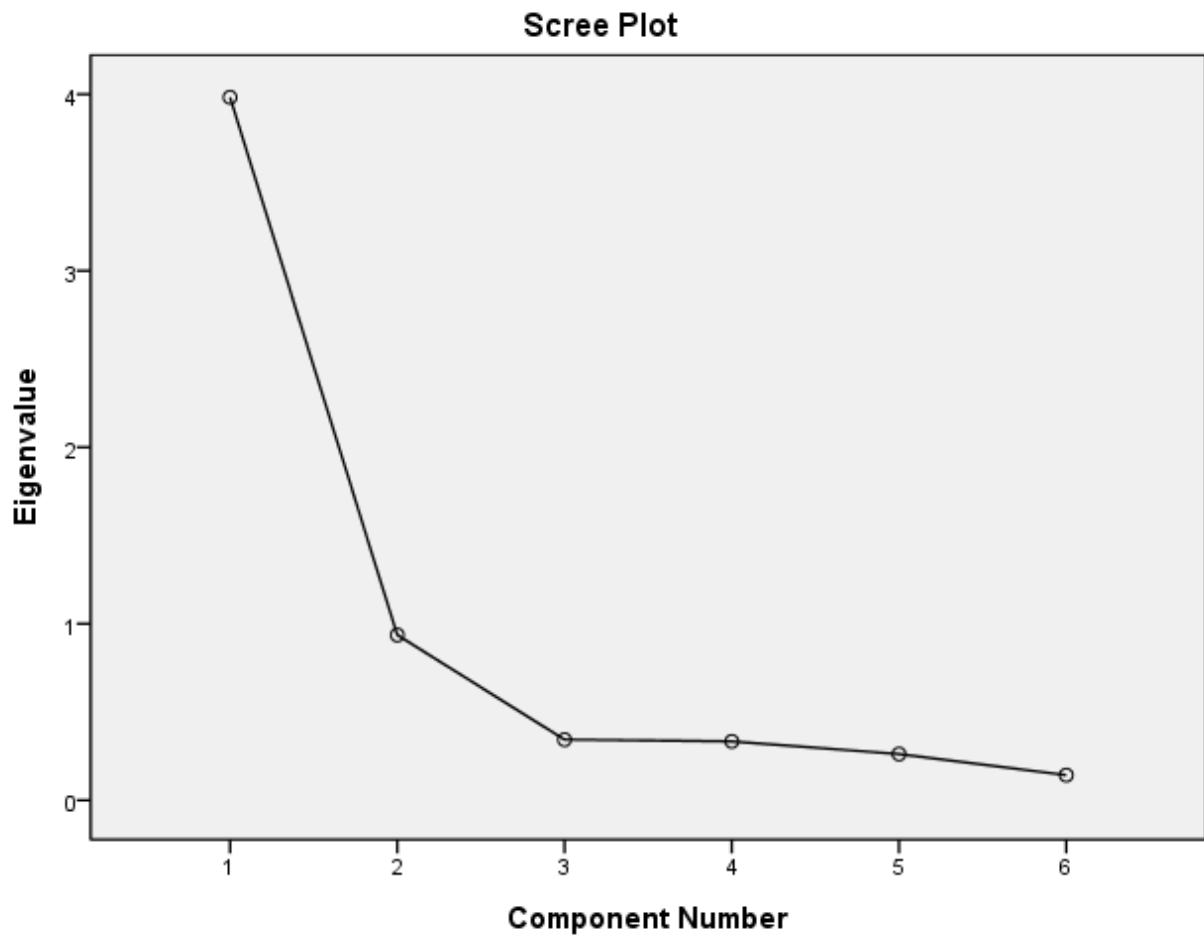
### **Third Grouping of Questions: Professional Networking**

This section of questions concerns cohort members' perceptions of whether they felt they were able to build their professional network as a result of being a member of a cohort. The scree plot in Figure 3 shows that one component factor operated among these questions.

The component matrix in Table 5 shows that only a single scale was found and a rotated component matrix could not be performed. However, Questions 10E and 10 F needed to be recoded because they were negative. They are recoded as REVQ10E and REVQ10F. This factor has been named the *Networking Factor*. The questions that comprise this factor are 10A, 10B, 10C, 10D, 10E, 10F.

- I believe that the contacts that I have made in my classes will open future doors for me.
- I believe that the friendships that I have established in my classes will significantly increase my chances of obtaining a future position.
- My relationships with other students will enhance my professional standing.
- My relationships with other students will help me to succeed in the future.
- There are no professional benefits to networking with students in class.
- Establishing relationships with other students provides no advantage when applying for a position.

Table 6 shows that the alpha for the Networking Factor is .896.



*Figure 3.* Third grouping scree plot

Table 5

*Third Grouping Rotated Component Matrix*

<u>Rotated Component Matrix<sup>a</sup></u>	
	<u>Component</u>
	<u>1</u>
Q10A	.832
Q10B	.818
Q10C	.897
Q10D	.854
Q10E	-.768
Q10F	-.706

<sup>a</sup>1 components extracted.

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis.

Table 6

*Third Grouping Reliability Statistics: Networking Factor*

<u>Cronbach's Alpha</u>	<u>Number of Items</u>
.896	6

#### Fourth Grouping of Questions: Community of Learners

This section of questions concerned cohort students' perceptions of themselves as being members of a community of learners. The scree plot in Figure 4 shows that there is one component factor among these questions. The rotated component matrix in Table 7 reveals that questions 11A and 11B do not load on the component factor. These two questions concern students in classes considering themselves as team members and accepting each other as equals. As these questions are not closely related to the other question in this factor, they are eliminated.

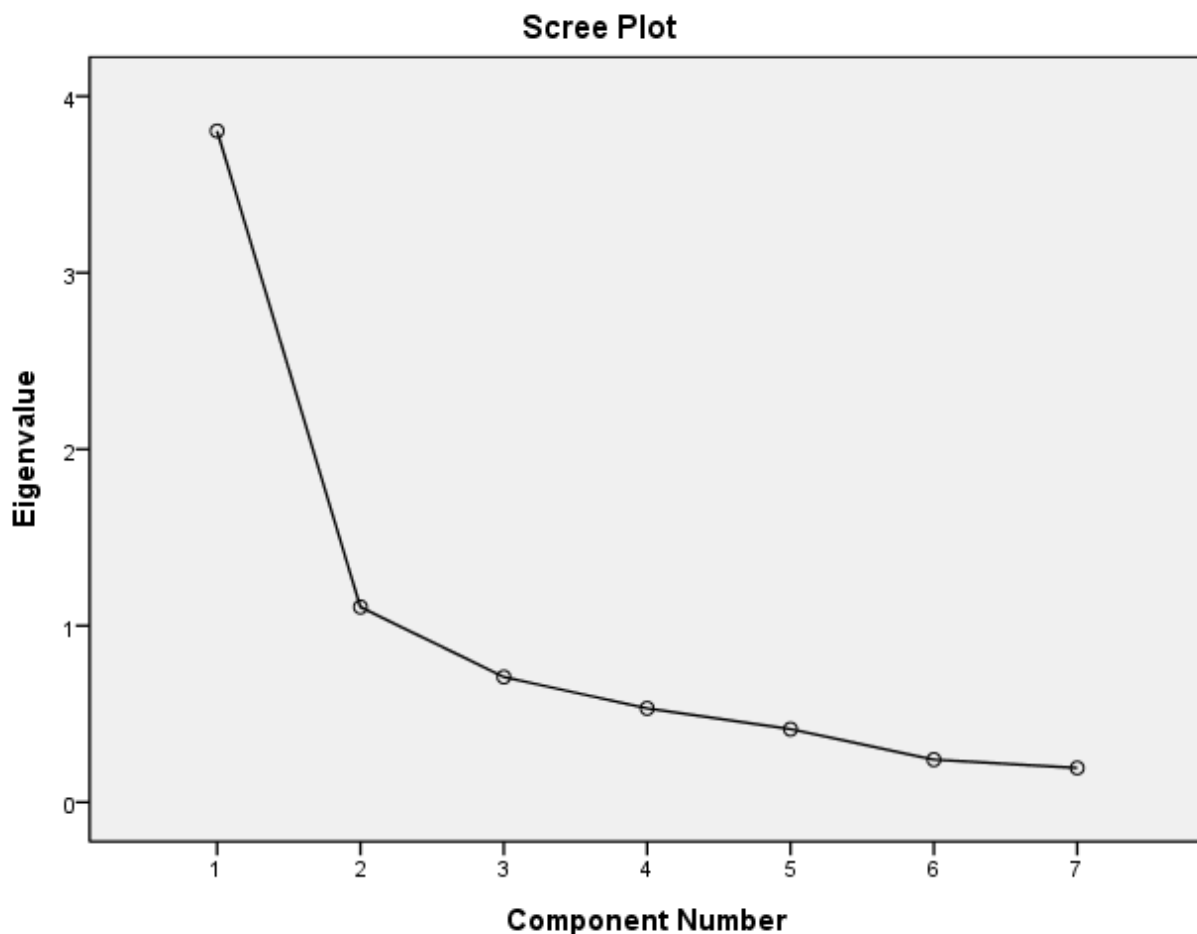


Figure 4. Fourth grouping scree plot

Table 7

*Fourth Grouping Rotated Component Matrix*

	<u>Rotated Component Matrix<sup>a</sup></u>	
	<u>Component</u>	
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>
Q11A		.685
Q11B		.919
Q11C	.819	
Q11D	.578	.509
Q11E	.794	
Q11F	.850	
Q11G	.817	

<sup>a</sup>Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation method: Varimax with Kiser Normalization.



Two factors emerged from this function. The first factor is related to how students perceive their place within the cohort group and it has been named the *Community of Learners* Factor. The questions that comprise this factor are questions 11C, 11D, 11E, 11F, and 11G.

- Q11C. I feel part of a group in my classes.
- Q11D. My classmates feel welcome and comfortable in classes.
- Q11E. I feel comfortable expressing my opinions in my classes.
- Q11F. I feel close to other students in my classes.
- Q11G. I feel that I can count on other students if I need help with my courses.

The second factor is related to a similar concept of feeling a part of the group. The questions that address this factor are questions 11A, 11B, and 11D.

- Students in all my classes consider themselves team members
- Students in all my classes accept each other as equals.
- My classmates feel welcome and comfortable in classes.

However, it was decided that the five questions that make up the first factor above form a valid, reliable factor that is robust enough to measure the concept of Belonginess. The second factor, which also seemed to measure a very similar concept, did not add any value so it was excluded.

The reliability analysis found in Table 8 shows that the alpha for the Community of Learners Factor is .871.

Table 8

*Fourth Grouping Reliability Statistics: Community of Learners Factor*

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Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
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A summary of these factors, and the questions in the survey that related to them, appears in Table 9.

Table 9

*Summary of Factors in the Survey*

Factor	Items
General Cohort Experience	<p><b>Q6A.</b> Being a member of this cohort helps me to feel a part of the program.</p> <p><b>Q6C.</b> Being a member of my cohort contributes to my academic success.</p> <p><b>Q7A.</b> Being a member of my cohort has provided me with the confidence to participate in discussions and speak my mind without fear.</p> <p><b>Q7D.</b> The cohort system has enabled me to develop relationships with faculty and peers that will serve as a resource in my professional life.</p> <p><b>Q7G.</b> Overall, my experience with the cohort system has been very positive.</p>
Trust Within the Cohort Factor	<p><b>Q6B.</b> I am an outsider in my cohort.</p> <p><b>Q6F.</b> The cohort system encourages the development of cliques.</p> <p><b>Q6G.</b> The cohort system encourages and supports the free expression of varying viewpoints.</p>

Table 9 – continued

Factor	Items
Networking	<p><b>Q7B.</b> My cohort fosters the development of trust and respect among members.</p>
	<p><b>Q7G.</b> Overall, my experience with the cohort system has been very positive.</p>
	<p><b>Q10A.</b> I believe that the contacts that I have made will open future doors for me.</p>
	<p><b>Q10B.</b> I believe that the friendships that I have established in my classes will significantly increase my chances of obtaining a future position.</p>
	<p><b>Q10C.</b> My relationships with other students will enhance my professional standing.</p>
	<p><b>Q10D.</b> My relationships with other students will help me to succeed in the future.</p>
	<p><b>Q10E.</b> There are no professional benefits to networking with students in class.</p>
	<p><b>Q10F.</b> Establishing relationships with other students provides no advantage when applying for a position.</p>

Table 9 – continued

Factor	Items
Community of Learners Factor	<b>Q11C.</b> I feel part of a group in my classes.
	<b>Q11D.</b> My classmates feel welcome and comfortable in classes.
	<b>Q11E.</b> I feel comfortable expressing my opinions in my classes.
	<b>Q11F.</b> I feel close to other students in my classes.
	<b>Q11G.</b> I feel that I can count on other students if I need help with my courses.

## **CHAPTER 4. RESULTS**

Research on the use of the cohort structure has frequently reported that students have had a positive experience with this model. They have identified elements of the structure that they appreciated such as the peer support, development of supportive social bonds, and lasting relationships. Research, though, has not reported with any high frequency how students actually use the structure. While it was originally developed to be a professional learning community for students, these are not the primary reasons students report about their positive experience. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how students in a doctoral educational leadership cohort use the structure, as a learning community or as a method of social support.

The following research questions were used to guide the study.

How do cohort members experience the cohort structure of the doctoral educational leadership program?

1. What are cohort members' attitudes toward the cohort?
2. Do attitudes toward the cohort structure vary by student characteristics?
3. How does the cohort structure support students while in the program?
4. Does the cohort structure produce mutual academic and intellectual stimulation of members (through the critiquing and sharing of materials, ideas, and resources) or does it foster an atmosphere of social dependence and stifle intellectual growth?

## **Analysis Of Survey Data - Phase I Of Data Collection**

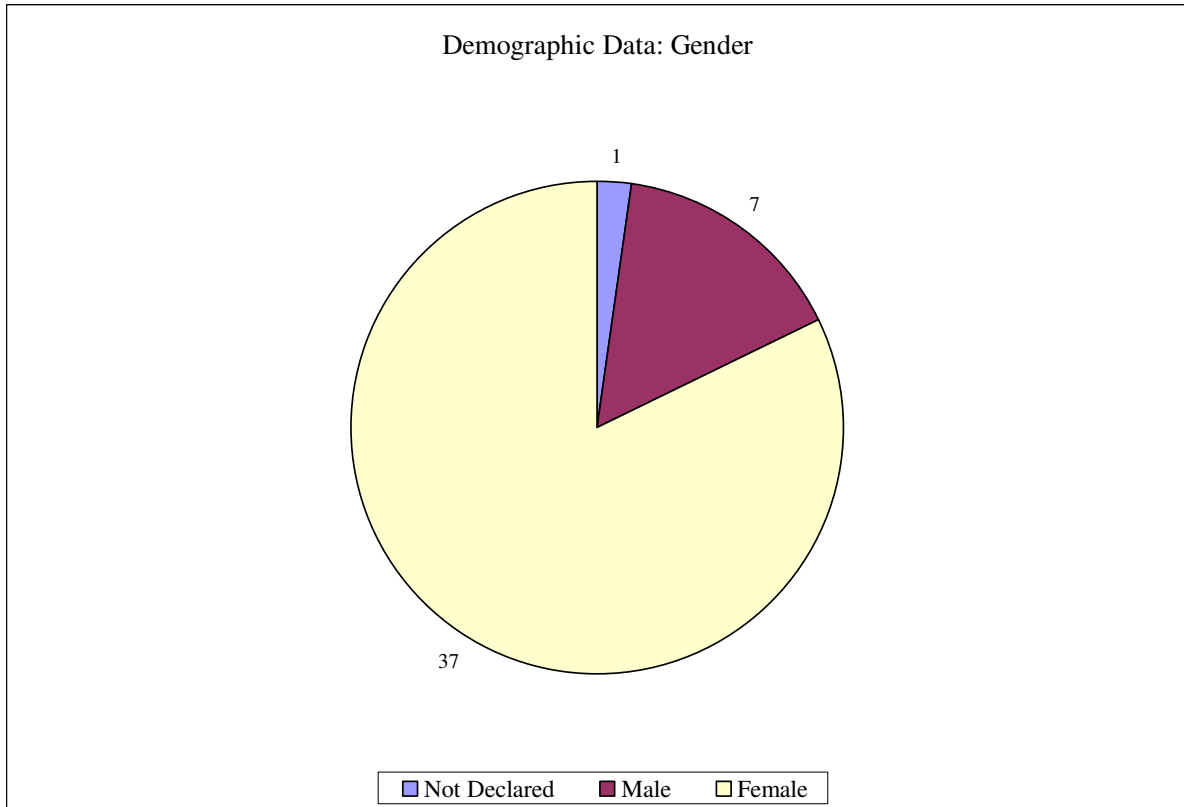
The first section of this chapter describes the findings from the survey phase of data collection (see Appendix B for survey instrument). The program, PASW Statistics 18.0.3, was used to analyze demographic data as well as data pertaining to attitudes toward cohort experiences, how members perceived themselves as a member of a cohort, and perception of the experience. Results are shared in both written and tabular format.

### **About the Sample**

A survey invitation was emailed to students who were either current members of a cohort at the university or those who had graduated from the university as a member of a cohort. Seventy-five people received the email invitation as well as the letter of support that was sent from the track coordinator of the Ph.D. program in educational leadership 6 days after the initial survey email invitation was distributed. Two more email reminders were sent, 14 days after the initial email and 11 days after that. In terms of response rate, a total of 45 participants took the survey, which equated to a response rate of 60%.

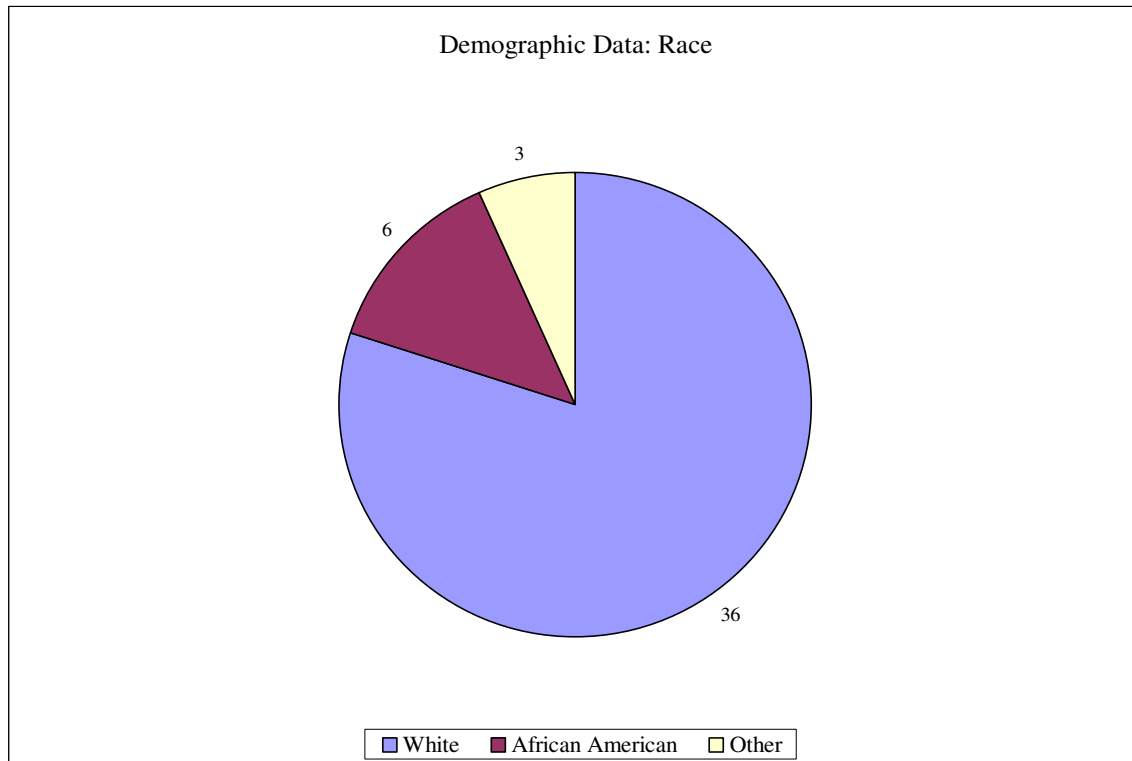
With respect to gender of participants, 7 were males (15.56%) and 37 were females (82.22%), and 1 participant did not report gender (2.22%). As shown in Figure 5, the majority of participants were female.

When considering race, 36 participants indicated they were White (80.0%), 6 reported they were African American (13.33%), and 3 reported they were another race (6.67%) as shown in Figure 6.



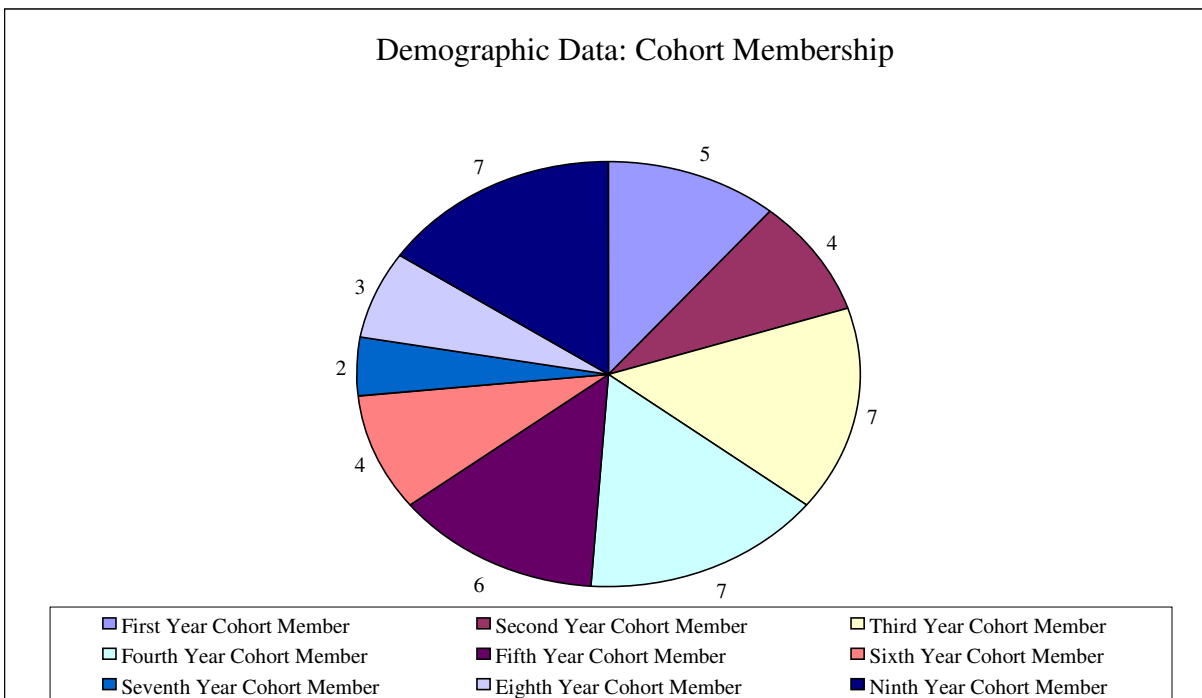
*Figure 5.* Demographic data: Gender.





*Figure 6.* Demographic data: Race

Participants were asked to indicate the cohort with which they were affiliated. The third-year cohort and the fourth-year cohort, respectively, each had seven members take part in the survey, which was 15.56% of the overall total. Participants were also given the option to choose “Other” so as to accommodate those participants who may have moved between cohorts as a result of time constraints or other issues or who did not wish to share their cohort membership. There were seven participants (ninth-year cohort) who indicated Other in terms of their membership (15.56%). The fifth-year cohort had 6 participants who took the survey (13.33%); and 5 first-year cohort members whose cohort is not district specific also took the survey (11.11%). Of the same type of cohort that was in its second year, 4 members responded to the survey (8.89%). Finally, 3 members of the eighth-year cohort took the survey (6.67%), 2 who were members of the seventh-year cohort (4.44%), and 4 who were members of the sixth-year cohort (8.89%) also participated (see Figure 7).



*Figure 7.* Demographic data: Cohort membership.

In the demographic portion of the survey, participants also were asked to share their age and their number of years in education. Three participants declined to respond to this question, so of the 42 who did, their mean age was 43.214 years old and the standard deviation from this number was 8.615 year. The minimum value was 28.0 years and the maximum value was 64.0 years (see Table 10).

Table 10

*Average Age of Cohort Participants*

Age	<i>n</i>	Missing	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	42	3	43.21	8.62	28.00	64.00

Of the 45 participants, 1 declined to respond to the item about experience in education. Across those that did respond, their average number of years was 16.89 years and the standard deviation was 8.23 years. The minimum and maximum values were 4.00 and 42.00 years, respectively, as shown in Table 11.

Table 11

*Average Number of Years in Education of Survey Participants*

Age	<i>n</i>	Missing	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	44	1	16.87	8.28	4	42

## Student Attitudes Towards Cohorts

**Overall attitudes.** The overall attitudes of students towards the cohort structure are displayed in Table 12. On a scale of 1 to 4, these are the averages of student attitudes. Of note, the standard deviations

Table 12

*Overall Attitudes of Students Towards Cohorts*

Factor	Mean	Median	Mode	S.D.	Min.	Max.
General Cohort Experience	3.0317	3.2000	3.40	.58755	1.20	3.80
Trust Within the Cohort	2.9634	3.000	3.00	.54360	1.50	4.00
Networking	2.7285	2.6667	3.00	.53399	1.67	4.00
Community of Learners	3.1854	3.0000	3.00	.45911	2.40	4.00

of all factors are around the same general average. Also, all scores are equally variable around the mean score for each of the four factors. Of the Trust Within the Cohort Factor, the Networking Factor, and the Community of Learners Factor, the mode score is 3.00, on a scale of 1 to 4. Thus, students are generally positive about the cohort experience. There is some variability though. Additionally, the scores for the General Cohort Experience Factor are higher than the other factors in terms of mode and median, 3.40 and 3.2000, respectively.

With respect to General Cohort Experience, the number of students who participated was 41 as shown in Figure 8. The mean of cohort student scores was 3.03 and the Standard Deviation was 0.588.

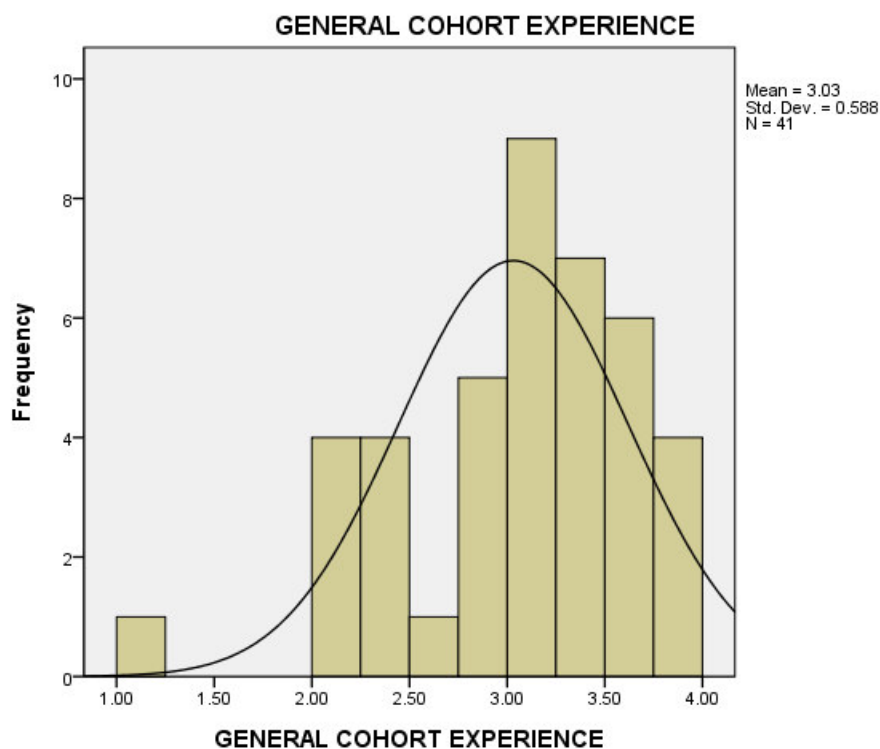
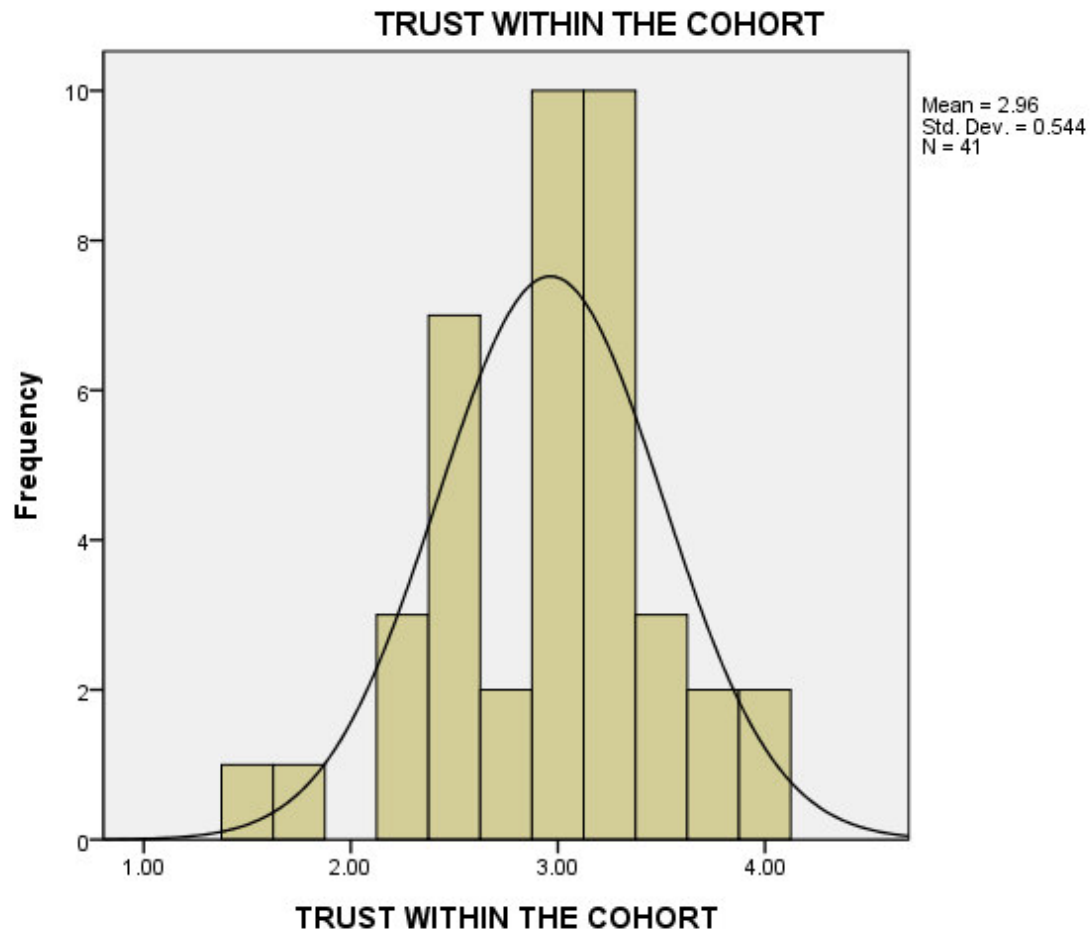


Figure 8. General cohort experience.

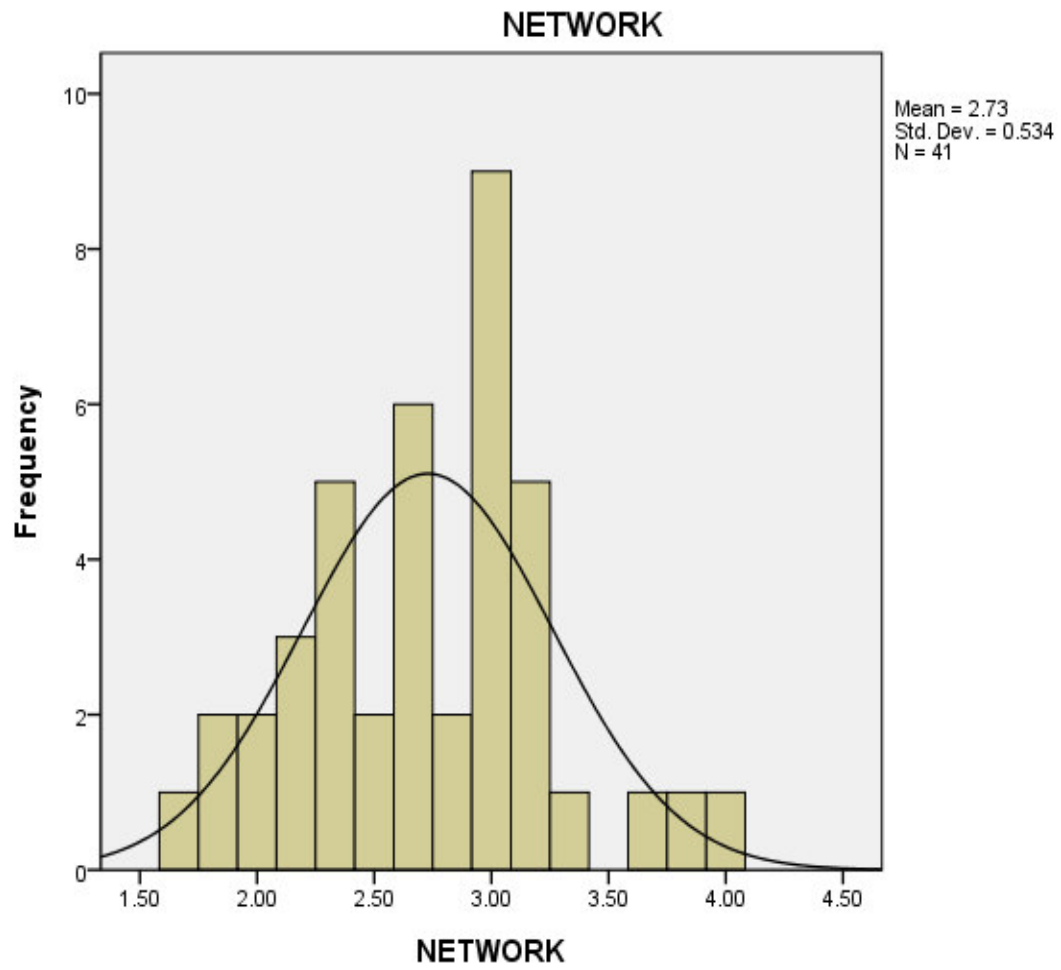
With respect to Trust Within the Cohort, the number of students who participated was 41 as shown in Figure 9. The mean of cohort student scores was 2.96 and the Standard Deviation was 0.544.



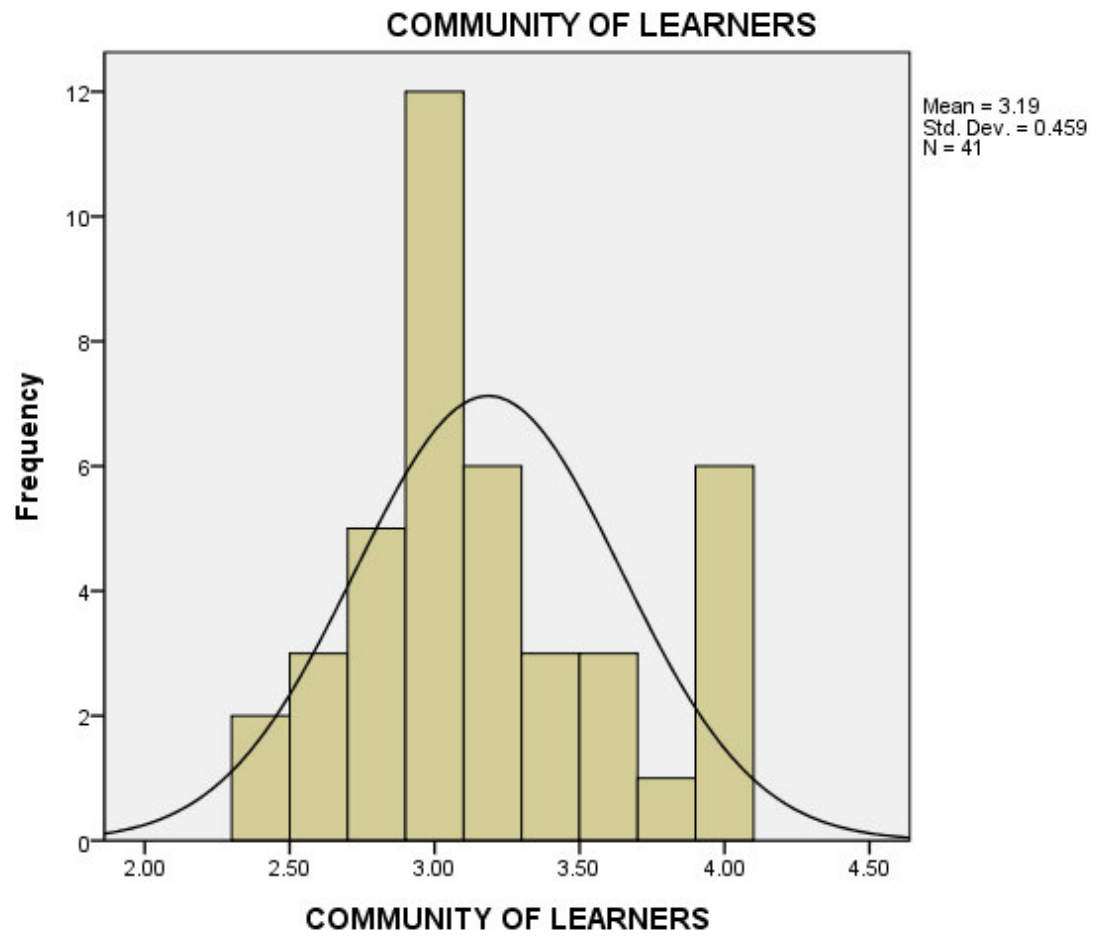
*Figure 9.* Trust within the cohort.

With respect to the Networking Factor, the number of students who participated was 41 as shown in Figure 10. The mean of cohort student scores was 2.73 and the Standard Deviation was 0.534.

With respect to the Community of Learners Factor, the number of students who participated was 41 as shown in Figure 11. The mean of cohort student scores was 3.19 and the Standard Deviation was 0.459.



*Figure 10.* Networking factor.



*Figure 11.* Community of learners.



**Differences in student attitudes.** The survey completed by participants requested that they provide demographic information such as gender, race, which cohort they are/were a member of, their age, and number of years in education. Using this information, tests of differences by these characteristics in the four factors were conducted.

**Gender.** An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to test for differences in student attitudes by gender. Table 13 reports that there are no differences by gender for the mean scores for each of the four factors. For each of the factors, the *p* value was not .05 or less.

**Race.** Before examining race to determine if there were differences amongst the four factors by race, a frequency test was conducted. There were 36 White participants, 6 African American participants, and 3 participants who marked themselves as Other. A decision was made to combine the three other races with the African American group. As a result, for comparison purposes, a new variable was created for White students and students of color. An independent samples *t*-test was then conducted to test for differences between the White students and the students of color. Table 14 shows no differences were found by race.

Table 15 shows that of the four factors, no *p* value was .05 or less.

**Cohort status.** A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to test for differences between cohorts. Table 16 reports that there was differences found by cohort status (membership) ( $f = 3.157$ ,  $p = .009$ ). There were no significant differences found within the General Cohort Experience factor, Networking, or Belonging.

Table 13

*Independent Samples T-Test: Gender*

Independent Samples Test											
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
GENERAL COHORT EXPERIENCE	Equal variances assumed	1.319	.258	-.143	38	.887	-.03824	.26685	-.57844	.50197	
	Equal variances not assumed			-.178	8.677	.863	-.03824	.21457	-.52639	.44992	
TRUST WITHIN THE COHORT	Equal variances assumed	.492	.487	-.418	38	.678	-.10294	.24638	-.60172	.39584	
	Equal variances not assumed			-.529	8.898	.610	-.10294	.19457	-.54386	.33798	
NETWORK	Equal variances assumed	.511	.479	1.584	38	.122	.35850	.22635	-.09972	.81671	

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS	d									
	Equal			1.90	8.325	.091	.35850	.18784	-	.7887
	variances not assumed			9					.07173	3
	d									
	Equal	4.14	.04	-	38	.539	-.12745	.20535	-	.2882
	variances not assumed	6	9	.621					.54316	6
	d									
	Equal			-	13.69	.343	-.12745	.12961	-	.1511
	variances not assumed			.983	1				.40604	3
	d									

Table 14

*Group Statistics: Race*

		Group Statistics			
	NewRace	<i>N</i>	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
General Cohort Experience	White	34	3.0794	.50679	.08691
	Students of Color	7	2.8000	.90185	.34087
Trust Within the Cohort	White	34	2.9706	.55991	.09602
	Students of Color	7	2.9286	.49401	.18672
Network	White	34	2.7990	.51375	.08811
	Students of Color	7	2.3857	.53294	.20143
Community of Learners	White	34	3.1941	.41337	.07089
	Students of Color	7	3.1429	.68034	.25714

Table 15

*Independent Samples T-Test: Race*

Independent Samples Test								
Levine's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
GENERAL COHORT EXPERIENCE	Equal variances assumed	3.940	.054	1.150	39	.257	.27941	.24289
	Equal variances not assumed			.794	6.800	.454	.27941	.35177
TRUST WITHIN THE COHORT	Equal variances assumed	.004	.950	.184	39	.855	.04202	.22840
	Equal variances not assumed			.200	9.473	.846	.04202	.20996
NETWORK	Equal variances assumed	.015	.902	1.927	39	.061	.41331	.21448
	Equal variances not assumed			1.880	8.459	.095	.41331	.21986
COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS	Equal variances assumed	4.936	.032	.266	39	.792	.05126	.19281
	Equal variances not assumed			.192	6.939	.853	.05126	.26674

Table 16

*One-Way Analysis of Variance: Cohort Status*

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
General Cohort Experience	Between Groups	4.496	8	.562	1.931	.089
	Within Groups	9.313	32	.291		
	<b>Total</b>	13.809	40			
Trust Within the Cohort	Between Groups	5.214	8	.652	3.157	.009
	Within Groups	6.606	32	.206		
	<b>Total</b>	11.820	40			
Network	Between Groups	2.621	8	.328	1.193	.334
	Within Groups	8.785	32	.275		
	<b>Total</b>	11.406	40			
Community of Learners	Between Groups	2.480	8	.310	1.667	.145
	Within Groups	5.951	32	.186		
	<b>Total</b>	8.431	40			

For the Trust Within the Cohort factor, a post hoc analysis using Tukey's test was conducted to determine where the differences were in the cohort groups. Differences were found between groups 1 and 7, and groups 7 and 9. Group 1 consisted of students who were considered first-year cohort members who began in 2009. Group/district 7 consisted of one of the cohorts that began in 2004. Group/district 9 consisted of a group labeled Other, referring to those students who moved between cohorts taking classes as they were offered and needed. The mean score for group/district 1 was 2.5625, the mean score for group 7 was 3.8750, and the mean score for group/district 9 was 2.5000. The mean scores are displayed in Table 17. Of the three groups, the group/district 7 cohort, one of the largest, had the highest mean and is significantly different than the first-year cohort group and the group comprised of other students.

#### **Cohort Membership: 48 Credit Hour versus 60 Credit Hour**

It was also necessary to take into consideration that of the types of cohorts, all groups are 60 credit hour division specific cohorts except the three most recent cohorts that are 48 credit hour cohorts. This group is a 48 credit hour nondivision specific meaning that members do not all work within the same county or division as all members of the 60 credit hour groups do. Thus, it is necessary to examine if there are differences by credit hour cohorts in the four factors. A new variable was created to tease out the 48 credit hour members from the 60 credit hour members. Table 18 shows the mean scores for each of the types of cohort groups on a Likert scale of 1 to 4. The mean score for the 48 credit hour cohort group was 2.8929 and the 60 credit hour cohort group was 3.2364.

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to see if there were differences in student attitudes between 48 credit hour students and 60 credit hour students (see Table 19). In regards to

Table 17

*Descriptives: Cohort Membership*

			N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Trust Within Cohort	1	4	25	2.56	.31458	.15729	2.0619	3.0631	2.25	3.00
	2	3	33	3.08	.14434	.08333	2.7248	3.4419	3.00	3.25
	3	7	86	2.92	.37401	.14136	2.5827	3.2745	2.50	3.50
	4	7	43	2.71	.58503	.22112	2.1732	3.2553	1.75	3.50
	5	6	50	3.37	.20917	.08539	3.1555	3.5945	3.25	3.75
	6	4	00	3.25	.61237	.30619	2.2756	4.2244	2.50	4.00
	7	2	50	3.87	.17678	.12500	2.2867	5.4633	3.75	4.00
	8	3	00	3.00	.43301	.25000	1.9243	4.0757	2.50	3.25
	9	5	00	2.50	.63738	.28504	1.7086	3.2914	1.50	3.00
Total			4134	2.96	.54360	0.8490	2.7918	3.1350	1.50	4.00



Table 18

## Group Statistics: Type of Credit Hour Cohort

		Group Statistics			
	NewCohort	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
General Cohort Experience	48 hour	14	2.8929	.49686	.13279
	60 hour	22	3.2364	.48457	.10331
Trust Within Cohort	48 hour	14	2.8571	.36314	.09705
	60 hour	22	3.1364	.56023	.11944
Network	48 hour	14	2.7048	.44219	.11818
	60 hour	22	2.8182	.59073	.12594
Community of Learners	48 hour	14	3.0286	.35826	.09575
	60 hour	22	3.3273	.49201	.10490

Table 19

*Independent Samples T-Test: Type of Cohort*

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed )	Mean Differenc e	Std. Error Differenc e	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
GENERAL	Equal	.001	.974	-	34	.048	-.34351	.16728	-	-
COHORT	variances			2.05					.68347	.00354
EXPERIENC	assumed			3						
E	Equal			-	27.30	.051	-.34351	.16825	-	.00152
	variances not			2.04	7				.68854	
	assumed			2						
TRUST	Equal	1.139	.293	-	34	.108	-.27922	.16897	-	.06417
WITHIN	variances			1.65					.62261	
COHORT	assumed			2						
	Equal			-	33.96	.078	-.27922	.15390	-	.03355
	variances not			1.81	6				.59199	
	assumed			4						
NETWORK	Equal	1.792	.190	-	34	.542	-.11342	.18420	-	.26093
	variances			.616					.48777	
	assumed									
	Equal			-	32.97	.516	-.11342	.17271	-	.23797
	variances not			.657	0				.46481	
	assumed									
COMMUNIT	Equal	3.831	.059	-	34	.058	-.29870	.15236	-	.01092
Y OF	variances			1.96					.60833	
LEARNERS	assumed			1						
	Equal			-	33.26	.043	-.29870	.14203	-	-
	variances not			2.10	7				.58757	.00983
	assumed			3						

the General Cohort Experience factor, a significant difference was found between the two groups of .048.

### **Age and Years in Education**

Bivariate correlations were computed to examine the relationship between students' age, years in education and their attitudes towards the cohort. Table 20 shows that no significant relationships were found after a Pearson's Correlation was computed for age, years in education and the four scales.

In conclusion, after the demographic data were analyzed to determine the composition of the group of participants who took the survey, it was necessary to determine if there were any differences by characteristics of the participants such as gender, race, cohort status, age, and years in education. A couple of minor differences were discovered. First, differences were found between the sixth-year cohort and the first-year cohort, as it was determined that the sixth-year group had a higher mean in terms of the level of trust within the cohort than did the first-year cohort. Secondly, there were differences between the 60 credit hour cohort group and the 48 credit hour cohort group in terms in general cohort experience. The 60 credit hour group rated themselves as being more satisfied with the cohort experience than did the 48 credit hour students. No other significant differences were found amongst the group characteristics by the four factors.

### **Analysis of Interview Data - Phase II of Data Collection**

This chapter provides an analysis of interview findings from the second phase of data collection (see Appendix H for focus group protocol). The experiences of cohort students in doctoral educational leadership cohorts are discussed in terms of their perceived usefulness of the cohort structure, the levels and types of social support experienced by students in the

Table 20

*Pearson's Correlation: Age and Years in Education*

	Correlations		
		Age	Years
General Cohort Experience	Pearson Correlation	.075	.029
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.654	.861
	<i>N</i>	38	40
Trust Within Cohort	Pearson Correlation	-.066	-.241
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.692	.134
	<i>N</i>	38	40
Network	Pearson Correlation	-.155	.230
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.351	.154
	<i>N</i>	38	40
Community of Leaders	Pearson Correlation	.012	-.062
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.944	.704
	<i>N</i>	38	40
Age	Pearson Correlation	1	.802
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	<i>N</i>	42	42
Years	Pearson Correlation	.802	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	<i>N</i>	42	44

structure, and the sharing of information and resources amongst cohort members. Themes and patterns relating to student effects, accessibility, professional benefits, areas that were found lacking, off campus disconnect, sources of support, responsibility for cohort members, giving and receiving of support, and sources of information are discussed.

### **Focus Group Protocol**

Focus groups were conducted face to face with participants for approximately 60 minutes each. Focus group questions were designed to collect additional information from that which was gained from the survey phase of the study. Thus, the interviewer specifically focused on gaining participants' perspectives on what was most and least useful about the cohort structure.

Additionally, questions focused on the level of support they felt during their time as a member of a cohort, both given and received, and responsibility they felt for supporting fellow cohort members. Finally, questions asked participants to consider how, as members, they shared resources and information with one another and how they dealt with concerns about the program structure or requirements.

### **Focus Group Participants**

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to email the researcher if they were willing to be part of a focus group to further discuss their experience in a cohort. A total of 18 participants volunteered and ultimately 15 participated. The three who did not participate in the focus group were unable to do so for reasons of sickness or scheduling. Of the participants, 3 were males and 12 were females; 13 were White and two were African American. Five were members of the fourth-year cohort, 6 were members of the fifth-year cohort, 1 was a member of the seventh-year cohort, 1 was a member of the eighth-year cohort, 1 was a ninth-year cohort member, and 1 was a member of the first-year cohort. The age range of participants was from 33

to 55 years old with the average being 42.5 years of age. The number of years in education ranged from 10 to 27 with the average being 16 years.

Three focus groups were held on three separate dates. Each group was scheduled at 5 p.m. so as to accommodate the schedules of participants. Two of the groups were held at the school of the researcher and one group was held at the school of one of the participants due to distance participants would need to travel. There were 4 people in the first group, 6 in the second group and 5 in the third group. The first and third focus groups were mixed in terms of cohorts involved and the second focus group was solely made up of participants from one cohort.

### **Interview Findings**

Interview findings are grouped into three major categories: members' perceptions of the usefulness of the cohort structure; social support given and received within the cohort structure; and the manner in which information and resources were shared amongst members.

**Members' perceptions of the usefulness of the cohort structure.** In order to gain a better understanding of cohort members' perceptions about the usefulness of the cohort structure, participants were asked to consider three questions: what did they find useful about the cohort structure; what did they find least useful about the cohort structure; and if they would participate in a cohort structure again after having had this experience.

***Most useful about the cohort structure.*** When examining participants' responses to what they found most useful about the cohort structure, three primary categories emerged and were grouped in the following manner: student effects, accessibility, and professional benefits.

***Student effects.*** When examining participant responses related to student effects, there were two primary categories that student responses seemed to speak to: communication system and continued support after the cohort ended. The communication system referred to how

members supported one another through staying in touch as a method of showing their support for each other. Continued support refers to how, even after the cohort ended, students did not stop encouraging and supporting one another in their quest to finish their dissertation.

With respect to the communication system, students noted that one of the things they had found most useful about the cohort structure was the communication system that developed as a result:

I think the participants in the cohort, the students, I found to be the most useful of the cohort structure in terms of levels of support, in terms of communication. We did that ourselves. We wanted to make sure that we were there for one another and shared phone numbers and email addresses and made sure people knew about deadlines and changes in deadlines and registering for courses and such.

Another member noted how, after having to take a bit of time off from the program, her cohort members continued to reach out to her show their support and let her know that they still considered her a member of their group even though she wasn't in class with them:

I look at it as motivation and encouragement. Because you could be out there in the wilderness where I was, without—and running into people you know who were from your cohort and, 'How are you doing, let me know whatever I can do to help.' So that was a plus.

Cohort participants also noted that they felt continued support from one another, not just during the time the cohort was together, but after it ended as well, when they had moved into the dissertation writing phase of the program. One participant shared her experience with seeing other cohort members who had finished and the encouragement they had continued to show her as she moved through the dissertation process:

. . .that has felt like one of the most supportive parts of it for me, is the questions. Every time I've seen [student], we have talked about where are you, what are you doing.

[Student] and I, even through changing counties and falling into [another] cohort, because they were my friends and colleagues, when I went to [another] cohort, [student] pushed my buttons every time I saw her. [Student] pushed my buttons every time I saw him. So I felt that to be really supportive.

Another participant discussed how she has continued to remain close to another member of her cohort who has stopped making progress and how she continues to encourage and support her:

I think we've all stayed in touch with several people from our cohort. There's been like different pairs that have paired off, that stay in touch, and people question. And I think it's really not so much for nosiness or trying to get to the race. . . .But I think it's because we want to be able to support each other. Like there's one person from our cohort that I stay closely in touch with and I keep on saying, 'Where are you, I want us to walk together.' And it's a support. Like how can we help each other.

Another member shared how she views the questioning about progress as a supportive encouraging method, not as a competitive inquiry, to see who has finished and who was not:

I think the competitive nature is. . . .I think we have spent, at least I know [student] and I have spent more time figuring out who is not done for who do you need to reach out to. . . .we're still a support system.

The support cohort members felt from one another that continued communication clearly existed not only while they were still in the cohort and saw each other on a weekly basis, but continued even after the cohort ended and they moved into the more independent phase of their



program. Members actively sought each other out to encourage one another to continue moving forward with the program even though they may have lost the momentum of the group moving forward.

*Accessibility.* A second area that focus group participants discussed pertained to how accessible the cohort structure made the doctoral program. Accessibility in this instance refers to how easy or difficult participants found the mechanics of the program through the structure of the cohort. In particular, students mentioned class registration, the reduced tuition costs, and the convenience location-wise. One participant discussed the ease of these aspects of the structure:

I think that what was really helpful and useful for us was that our classes were scheduled for us, up until the time that we were becoming more independent. The location was easy. Parking was easy. That was easy stuff. And the price was also helpful because noncohort students certainly have a much larger financial responsibility.

Another student explained the accessibility this way:

I felt it was very accessible is probably how I would describe it. With the classes being chosen for us, there was a location that was easy, the price was affordable. But when you look at the total cost for a Ph.D., you've not going to have to put a second mortgage on the house to do it, which is important. In some ways I kind of think it was easy and I don't mean that in that the workload was easy, or doing the work was easy, but the way everything was kind of set up and planned for you, if you do could do the work, then it would basically push you through. You just kind of ride the wave.

When considering location in particular, another cohort member noted:

For me, it would be the accessibility of the classes. For us the classes—we were a (county) cohort, so the classes remained in [that county]. . . .So I really liked the continuity of the classes and they came to us, so I liked that structure.

Another cohort member reflected on her experience as an undergraduate compared with her experience as a member of the cohort and shared that:

I liked the idea that, I remember from my undergraduate work, you were kind of on your own. You had to figure out what did I need, when do I need to take it, is it going to be available, and the nice thing about the cohort was it was mapped out. . .I can remember just feeling like I was putting my head down, putting one foot in front of the other, and it was all mapped out. I found that to be a plus.

Participants also discussed specific actions the university took that were specific to off campus students and cohort students that made various aspects of their experience much easier and convenient. One cohort member explained it this way: “And they also treated us very well because, like anything we needed, because we were a cohort and off-campus, they would mail us anything we wanted from the library and pay for us to mail it back.”

Another cohort member found the manner in which the university took into consideration the schedule of the cohort members to be very agreeable.

I thought it was useful that they would also know what everyone’s schedule—like this is everybody and this is when their breaks are and this is where this is a major part of the schools and this is when we’re doing our SOL testing and things like that so they could accommodate our schedule versus us having to make our schedule fit [university’s] schedule.

Cohort students found that a great deal of stress that is usually associated with a traditional on-campus program—registering for classes, determining what semester they would be taught, etc.—was removed because of how the cohort was structured. All classes, while the cohort was intact, were scheduled and cohort members were registered for them and professors came to the county in which the cohort was taking place to teach classes.

The university was also able to take into account extremely busy times of the year for cohort members who were also school employees—SOL testing, opening of school—and were able to schedule around those times so members could focus solely on their jobs. Finally, the university also seemed to make efforts to accommodate cohort members in terms of their research needs. Thus, the cohort structure was able to put in place many elements that removed normal stress from cohort participants who typically have other stressors in their lives from full-time employment, families, and other duties.

*Professional benefits.* A final area that focus group participants discussed when considering the most useful aspects of the cohort were the professional benefits of the cohort. When referring to professional benefits of the cohort, members reflected on how the cohort experience had helped them grow in a professional nature and affected their roles as professionals.

One area they specifically focused on was the collective learning community aspect of it and the benefits they felt from it, particularly making connections professionally which helped them build their skills as an educator. One member described it as, “That support and learning how other divisions do things, that was just so enriching.”

Another participant noted how she had been able to grow her professional network of resources:

But I think another thing, even outside just the academic piece of the cohort, it brought together people from within our own county that we have now found resources in different areas. Like three of the people in our cohort were special education liaisons and so we were. . .that was, when we had a problem then within our schools, doing our daily job, then we had a resource we could go to that was. . .you know, sometimes you need a confidential resource as far as what do I do in this situation or who do I call.

Participants also commented on how they found it useful that, in the first cohort and a later cohort that was not division specific, they were able to get to know other people outside of not only their own division but also outside of the field of education and the impact this had on their learning.

One of the nice things is we have people who are working for the community health system, people in the department of ed, people who are working for [medical school] so you get to make connections across different workplaces that you might not have if you were just in one county. . .I see that as a benefit and I think most people from the other ed leadership folks do because it's just nice to have a different perspective.

Participants also discussed how they actively tried to learn about how other counties do things and how this might help their approach in their own county.

I liked the part of the cohort where it wasn't 100% us. There were other outside groups and I often tried to sit by those guys to try to pick their brains to find out what's going on with you and to kind of translate what [county] people say—this is what we do—and they had no clue what was going on in our county.

Group participants also felt that meeting people outside of their school level was very beneficial to them, not only in building their skills as a professional but also in developing an appreciation for and understanding of one another's job.

And we met people outside of our areas, secondary people are so secondary and elementary people are so elementary, and it's good to be together and work together and learn to appreciate each other's worlds because they each. . .it's not like one's harder than the other, but if you've never lived in the other world, you just really don't know it. And I think this gave us opportunities to share some of what our worlds are and how they overlap.

As a result of the cohort structure, participants were able to strengthen their understanding of K-12 education as a whole, not just the level they participated in and build a collegial relationship and understanding of their colleagues.

Another area participants discussed in-depth was the effect participating in a cohort had on their skills as an educator. They felt that as a result of having been a part of a cohort, they had seen their professional skills and confidence grow as well.

And I personally found my confidence grew as an instructor. I think I was probably the only practicing teacher in the cohort. And that was a little intimidating for me. I honestly felt very intimidated by all of the principals and administrators and I was the only teacher in the group. . . .My confidence just grew in leaps and bounds by working with the same group of people. And I can remember that I said, 'You know what, I used to wonder if I really was a good teacher and now I know I am.' Because I got that feedback that was not intentional. But I think when you get to know each other and begin to respect each other

as colleagues, that you can do in a cohort, it's greater than the sum of all the individual pieces.

Participants also noticed the effect the cohort structure had on the way they instructed students in their own schools as well. They worked to teach students about the effect a cohort, whether it be an academic cohort or otherwise, can have on their lives.

It's interesting because in my own instruction, I think I'm. . .I'm intentional in how I structure things, to try to produce a cohort effect, even within my own students. And I think it might be a direct reflection, somewhat to my own experience. Because I tell kids all the time, 'You know what, you've got to get out there and you've got to form a small group and you need to get this support structure and somebody that you can call and meet with and hold you accountable.' And I think it is a direct reflection of my own experience. So in some respects, it's impacted my own instruction and how I might structure what I sort of set kids up to do.

Thus, cohort participants are carrying, not only the academic piece of what they learned from the doctoral program but also the structure they participated in as well. They are using it as a way to help their own students succeed academically.

When reflecting upon the usefulness of the cohort structure, focus group participants found many aspects of it that were beneficial to them. They noted that the communication and support they received from one another during the program, as well as after it had ended, had served to be a continuing motivator and source of support. Participants also found that the structure made a number of aspects of the educational leadership program very accessible to them. Having the program mapped out for them, the cost of classes, and the location of the classes were all discussed as being a significant benefit to them. The university also made several

allowances to the cohorts because they were off campus that helped members to use university resources with ease. Finally, members found that the cohort structure had had a positive effect on them professionally as well. They found themselves carrying over the benefits of the cohort into how they structured their own teaching and professional activities. They also were able to expand their professional network as a result of the relationships that developed in and as a result of the cohort.

***Least useful about the cohort structure.*** When examining participants' responses to what they found least useful about the cohort structure, two primary categories emerged and were grouped in the following manner: issues relating to areas students found lacking and a disconnect that resulted from being off campus.

***Areas found lacking.*** When examining student responses related to areas they found lacking, there were four primary categories that emerged: diversity of thought, communication from the university, support from chair, and support after 890/the cohort was dissolved. The lack of diversity of thought refers to how, because cohort members got to know each other so well and were together for so long, that it seemed as if no new ways of thinking were added to the group. They felt that they grew in their knowledge of the subject but only to a certain point. Members either knew how each other felt about certain topics so they didn't bother to discuss with any depth their views on it; or because they knew how members felt about a certain subject, they didn't want to offend each other with a differing or potentially offensive viewpoint so they did not bring it up. One group participant explained his perspective on the topic this way:

One thing I haven't heard is I felt like there wasn't as much diversity of thought in the cohort because we got to know each other and were able to express our opinions and I

think we refined our thoughts and our beliefs, but I'm not sure that after a while there was that value added that there could have been by other people.

Another student agreed with the lack of diversity of thought and viewed it through the lens of how it might have affected future job opportunities, particularly in regards to being in a cohort with people from the county where she worked.

I agree with [student] on the diversity of thought piece. That was one thing that was problematic for me from the very beginning. And that might be just my. . .I never knew whether that was just my learning style because I do like to experience lots of different things. . .I like to hear really different thoughts and I think our understanding of each other kept us sometimes from talking about those things. I know at least for me, you know, when you're on that edge of a leadership position, there is some fear that there's going to be an opinion formed because you've said something in a class and, you know, that was stifling for me in some cases.

Cohort members seemed to feel that they might not have explored as many areas in educational leadership with one another because of the close relationship that developed as a result of the cohort structure. They got to know one another so well that they either felt they already knew how their classmates felt about the topic so there was no point in discussing it any further, or they were afraid of offending one another with a differing viewpoint, or they were afraid of the effect that differing viewpoints or viewpoints in the minority may have had on future employment advancement as they were in a cohort with people from their own county who would be making those decisions.



Another area that focus groups found to be lacking was support from the university. In particular, students found communication from the university to the cohort regarding changes and basic information to not be forthcoming. One participant described it by saying:

I do believe communication was a huge issue with our cohort and that was unfortunate, had Dr. [professor] not retired, I think things would have been better. But we started off with an advisor for one semester, he retired, and then we were given another advisor. Well, he never really did any advising. And then eventually, he was let go from the university, we didn't even know that and we really had no advisor.

Another participant expressed frustration about the lack of communication at the comprehensive test stage.

I completely agree with you about the kind of feeling left—dropped off once 890—and actually for me it was before 890 was done, during comps. . . . I looked around and thank God I had, at that point, fallen into at least another group of people who had experienced it. Because if I hadn't, the resistance I was hitting at the university level and trying to get communication with people to know what was going on, it was difficult at best.

A closely related aspect of this issue pertained to a lack of support from the university of the cohort. One participant stated:

I do feel like there wasn't a lot of support from the institution at times, for the cohort. And I think that they were inflexible sometimes with deadlines, inflexible with assignments. That every course started off with 'We understand y'all are all working professionals, we understand that most of you in here hold positions of administrative, if not something else, and that you put in 50, 60 hours a week. . . .' I didn't see that

reflected in our work assignments, that they really understood that. I do believe communication was a huge issue with our cohort and that was unfortunate.

Another issue that emerged when discussing the lack of communication from the university was the lack of support from the chair of the dissertation committee. Participants felt that the level of support they were receiving from their chair was much less than they had expected and were generally dissatisfied with the relationship in general. One participant described her relationship with her chair this way.

My thinking was okay, then when you get to 890, you're going to have your chair person and your chair person is going to be the person that pushes you, and I haven't found that to be true either. It's more like you said, it's very self-directed, self-initiated. And I always thought that an advisor was going to be the one that was right there with you and was doing the whole program with you and pushing your and saying we know you can do it. So that's what I felt was really lacking.

The same participant went on to further describe her relationship with her chair by saying,

That's what I expected the chair to help with—and I guess it still goes back to that we never had an advisor. So then I expected my chair to become my advisor and I don't think that happened either. Now if I push I think I'll get some response, but I'm doing all of the initiating, I'm doing what do you think about this or what do you think about that?"

Another participant compared the stark difference between the positive relationship she had with her chair and those of others in her cohort.

I also believe it depends on the chair that you select. Because I had a really good chair and my chair was able to come up with names of people that he was comfortable with, that he had worked with before, and he helped me. But I totally know what you're talking

about because most of the people who had put their committees together, did not know where to begin. And they said ‘Who’s your chair, your chair helped you with that?’

‘Yeah, my chair helped me with that.’ But my chair was just uniquely different than a lot of the other chairs. . . .There was just something different.

Since participants were not receiving the support from their chair that they felt they should at this stage in the process, they often reported turning to their fellow cohort members. Although the cohort had dissolved, they still were able to provide the support to one another that they needed. One participant described her experience at a particular stage by saying,

. . .and having even found like at this stage, I’m still dependent on our cohort members. Like I talked to [cohort member] several times in the past, what, 6 weeks or so, about different paperwork because nobody else was telling me exactly what I had to submit for IRB. You go on the IRB website, you would think you only have to submit the exempt form. Nobody says that you have to submit the consent form, the this, the this. . . .Well, had [cohort member] not gone through that and [cohort member] got that from somebody else and so forth, we still are depending on one another. And that’s where I think there’s a lack of leadership.

Another participant described her own experience in moving through the process of finishing her dissertation and how she received support from a cohort member who had finished before her and how she helped those after her.

But I think we pulled each other along. The very first one through graduated. . . .As he finished, he shared everything with me because [cohort member] and I were like the next in line. All those answers we didn’t know. . . .He provided the answers. I passed them to

[cohort member]. I passed them to you. I know you will pass them on to [two other cohort members]. They start going down, that we're helping each other.

Another cohort member who has finished her dissertation described the relationship she has with other members of her cohort who are working on their dissertations but are not getting the level of or type of support from their chair that they feel they need. She said, "I have two members of our cohort for whom I am currently acting as their almost unofficial chair. They come to me with questions," since they felt that they were not getting answers from their chairs.

One woman explained one of the lasting effects the cohort has had on her by saying, To me that's been one of the advantages of the cohort because I think those that have made it through, with the exception of [first cohort member to finish] have depended on someone else in the cohort for something. Be it talking about ideas, be it a dining room table you can work at so you can get away from your family because they won't leave you alone to write.

Thus, the cohort was able to provide the support that students felt they weren't receiving from the university. They were able to provide answers to questions that members could not get answers to, they were able to fill in where a chair or a committee was not meeting the needs of the student, or they passed down information to the next person who was going through the process to ensure they correctly completed each stage. Although the cohort had ended, its effects and benefits continued to be far reaching.

*Off-campus disconnect.* Another area that students found to be one of the least useful aspects of the cohort structure was the disconnect they felt from being off campus. One of the aspects that cohort members had previously discussed as being most useful was the convenient location of their classes. Generally, with the exception of one class, all classes that cohorts took

were held in a school located in their county of employment. Thus, they did not have to travel to the university and deal with parking, finding the appropriate building in which the class was located, etc. However, this same quality of being off campus also had several disadvantages. The inclusiveness that developed as a side effect of the cohort structure was mentioned by participants. The impersonality of the cohort also emerged as a part of the disconnect of being off campus. The cohort was treated as one instead of being made up of individual members. A third effect of being off campus pertained to difficulty at the dissertation stage of the process. Members reported obstacles to choosing a chair and committee.

With respect to the inclusiveness of the cohort, as a result of cohort members growing so close to one another, it often seemed that the cohort was unwelcoming to outsiders. Outsiders refer to those students who are not a member of any one cohort and take classes as they are available. Consequently, they are only with a particular cohort for one or two classes before they move on to other classes with another cohort. One student explained his experience this way.

I feel like we tried to be welcoming, but I also think that, you know, we just get so familiar with and so comfortable with each other that we're not. . .you know. We make an effort, but at the same time, you know, when we moved from [school] to [another school], you move, sit next to the people that you talk to, and you just kind of naturally, I think, gravitate. And when we have those 30 to 40 minute breaks, we'll go visit and we go to certain people.

A second student who did not work in the county in which her cohort was located noted her unique perspective as a result of this.

Our cohort was mixed. I was not from [county of the cohort]. We had a couple of other people who were not from [county]. But if you did not start with that group of us and we

had a class with some other people mixed in, it was not cohesive so I felt that way. So I guess in that way, sharing information, resources, the group dynamics didn't lend themselves to sharing with people who hadn't been part of the. . . I don't think we shunned anybody but it wasn't as open as I think some of the other experiences were.

Another cohort member, agreeing, said:

And some of that, too, is investment. We're already so invested with one another and I don't know if we're consciously thinking why am I going to. . . Right, get to know this person. They're only with us this one class, they're not going to be with us again. And I don't think we are. I don't think we're consciously thinking that. But we're already, like you said, so familiar.

A male student chimed in with his experience in his cohort.

I myself tried to approach this like I wanted to figure out what's going on in community college or just a full time [university] student, just trying to figure out more from that. There were others who were like either they figured they didn't need to deal with them because they weren't like going to get them promoted in the school division. They weren't as open to these outsiders and they figured I'm only going to see them one semester so I don't even need to get to know them. But I would try to reach out. I hope they didn't feel ostracized because they weren't part of the group.

Another participant described his feelings about this effect of the cohort structure by saying:

Life is very busy when you're in the middle of this and it's. . . you're kind of going and there's time and you get to visit and you just get into a pattern and move. Unfortunately, you're probably not as hospitable as you'd like to be.

As the group reflected on the effect this must have on the people who are not a part of the cohort, one member stated:

And I think it's one of those things where I like to think I'm being inclusive, but when I think about it, I realize I'm probably not as inclusive as I would like to believe that I am. And I can see how for others, coming into a class, that could be distancing and cold.

Another cohort member stated:

I feel sorry for people who are in cohorts that get off and then have to join another cohort. Because we had a couple jump into ours for one or two classes and they don't know all the inside jokes and personalities. . .sort of feel like an outsider. But cohorts are definitely inclusive.

Thus, one of the aspects of the cohort structure, the closeness that developed amongst cohort members because they were off campus and only in class generally with one another, was one of the things that upon reflection, members realized also created a disadvantage. The people who were not members of the cohort, but had to join it for a class or two, did not seem to benefit as much as they could have from that closeness.

The impersonality of the cohort structure was another aspect that members found to be a result of the feeling of disconnect of being off-campus students. Members discussed how they felt that the cohort was viewed as one entity instead of as an entity made up of individual members with different needs. One particular area in which this was noted related to classes. As previously mentioned, students enjoyed already having their classes chosen and mapped out for them. This reduced a lot of the stress associated with returning to university study. However, students also had difficulties with this feature. One cohort member said:

I was somewhat disappointed in the fact that our classes were given to us and that we didn't have any options to choose. Because sometimes the classes. . .how did they relate to educational leadership? Because I could honestly care less. It didn't have any interest for me and I was paying good money for it and I felt like if we had been given some options. . . .Even if it said, here are three classes. . .because I think that as an administrator, as an educational leader, I definitely have weaker suits and I would love to have been able to have taken a class that would have made me stronger in one of those areas. Or built upon my strengths. So I think in the structure of it, that was kind of a disappointing kind of thing.

A closely related aspect of this was how the cohort was treated as one entity. Simply because they were considered as one, this did not mean that everyone had the same knowledge of information about all aspects of the program. Everyone was not as informed to the same degree. One member stated,

What I like least about the cohort structure. . .sometimes I felt almost like cattle, like they moved us ahead and it was sort of impersonal. Not that I needed to be an individual at any particular time, but we had some form we had to fill out, like who was our advisor. . .I don't even know who our advisor was. All of those kinds of things because we were such a group and because we didn't need to be met with. . .we weren't individuals. I didn't know who my advisor was. A little personal attention or a little personalization would have been nice. I think that's probably a byproduct of us being off campus. That's one of the things I didn't like, was it was just very impersonal.

Thus, focus group participants felt that, because they were so disconnected being off campus, they were treated as one large group. The needs of individual students did not seem to



be taken into account when plans were made for the cohort at the university level, particularly in regard to the classes the cohort would take.

Many focus group participants expressed that they encountered great difficulties when trying to choose a dissertation committee chair and finding members to serve on the committee. This difficulty was attributed to the fact that the cohort was held off campus so they were disconnected from the university and did not know a lot of the faculty members. They either had never had a class with them or had only briefly seen them in passing; and they did not know them well enough to know their research interests or if they would be a good fit both personally and topic-wise. One group member described her experience by saying, “So you’re blindly asking these people you’ve never met, will you be part of my committee, here’s a brief. . .I mean, how awkward is that? That’s a very awkward conversation and you’re doing it by email.” Another member, when describing her committee stated, “I have four people on my dissertation committee. Three of them are unknown to me.” She felt that this was a result of not knowing professors because she was an off-campus student in a cohort, and she had to essentially take whom she could get on her committee.

Another student described her situation as an off-campus, nontraditional student compared to that of a traditional on-campus student by saying:

When it came time to pick a committee, I really felt that I only knew a few professors. And I think traditional doc students, who really get enmeshed in their program, my impression is that they really know a lot of professors and that they really have a much easier time forming a committee and that was. . .I know that has been a stumbling block for a lot of people that I’ve talked to who’ve been through the program so maybe that was location and that was maybe a plus and a minus.

A student who has finished reflected back on that time for her in the dissertation process and said:

The other challenge with being a cohort that met off campus was when it came time to select our chairs and our committee members, we really didn't know that many people because we had, if they hadn't taught us, we'd never been on campus, we hadn't seen anyone, it was limited exposure because of who was wanting to come and teach off campus. That proved very. . .that was probably the most daunting thing, with how do we come up with a committee that's the right committee for us. And I think some did that by luck better than others and that's been a detriment to some folks.

A member of the same cohort as the student above commented on how difficult it was for her to choose a committee because of not having those close relationships to the professors she had had in class and the effect of this later on when she experienced personal difficulties.

I wasn't one who was lucky enough to, I guess, feel like I had that kind of personal relationship with a lot of the instructors, to feel comfort in picking a chair and then having to go meet people that were strangers to me and sit down and try to convince them to be on my committee was difficult. And then when I was having difficulties personally, I didn't feel like I could talk to my chair. I didn't know her.

A member of her same cohort also noted another difficulty experienced by her cohort in general. Not only was it difficult to choose a chair and a committee from a department of people she felt like she did not really know, there was also the added challenge everyone else in her cohort doing the same thing at the same time. She stated, "There were 20-some of us and maybe 5 of them. And it was just going to be physically impossible to get that." Another person from

the same cohort noted, “I think that’s a negative of the cohorts, that they produce so many people at the same stage, that they themselves as a system have a hard time absorbing us.”

Thus, the design of the cohort structure produced difficulty for its members because of being an off-campus program. Students only knew faculty members who were willing to teach classes off campus and often these professors were “not eligible to be on a committee” as one student stated, or to chair a committee. The cohort structure also added another layer of difficulty to the process because the whole cohort finishes at the same time and everyone is trying to find the right chair and committee. Being off campus, although also acknowledged as a benefit by students, was found to have negative effects as well.

***Repeated cohort participation.*** As the final piece of considering the usefulness of the cohort structure, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences as a member of a cohort, both positive and negative. Based on this, would they participate in a cohort again? All participants answered affirmatively. One member shared that, “If we were to ever take another class in our life or a program. . .the cohort structure is good”.

Another member shared that: “I did a cohort for a master’s program so I already was familiar with the cohort program.” Her previous positive experience with the cohort structure was one of the things she had taken into consideration when deciding to participate in another cohort. She went on to say,

“...but a cohort experience, I experienced one really, really great one through [another university]. My second cohort experience, I still think it was great in terms of the support. And I will say that for all cohorts. The level of support in the colleagues and the friendships that are made, I don’t think you can beat that.

This cohort member felt that the social support fostered by the cohort structure was one of the most positive aspects of it. Another cohort member also agreed but added a caveat. She did not work in the same county as the other members of her cohort and had talked previously about how she felt she was at a detriment because of this.

If I had the chance, would I do it again, yeah, I would, I would participate in a cohort again. But this time, would want to start with the cohort and know the people. Because obviously my experience is different than everybody else's here. I think it helps when you start with it and you know the people who you're traveling with.

Thus, focus group participants felt that they experienced many positive aspects that resulted from the cohort structure. They felt so positively about their experience that they either have chosen to participate in another one (as they did for their doctorate) or would do so in the future.

In conclusion, there were a multitude of issues cohort member participants discussed in relation to the usefulness of the cohort structure. They found that the system of support and communication that developed between cohort members was immensely helpful and that the structure of the cohort made earning a doctorate in educational leadership while working full time more accessible than other models. Members also felt that while they supported one another, they also learned from other professionals in the cohort and as a result developed their skills as an educator and increased their confidence in their professional skills. However, there were also issues students found that resulted from the structure of the cohort that were not useful. Members found that the structure resulted in several areas that were lacking such as diversity of thought amongst members and communication and support from the university and their dissertation committee chair. They also struggled with one of the things that made the cohort

structure so desirable—the off campus aspect of it. Students reported a feeling of disconnect that resulted in the development of a certain level of inclusiveness within the cohort as well as how the cohort was viewed as a group instead of as individuals by the university. However, students reported that they would in fact participate in a cohort again after having had this experience.

**Members' perceptions of the social support of the cohort structure.** In order to gain an understanding of how cohort members perceived the social support of the cohort structure, focus group members were asked to consider five questions: (a) who they turned to for social support first when it was needed; (b) if they felt that students in the cohort supported one another when needed; (c) who else they turned to for support while in the cohort; (d) the level of responsibility they felt for supporting others in the program; and (e) if they felt that they had given and received similar amounts of support from other cohort members or if they felt they had received more or less support.

**Sources of support.** When examining participants' responses related to who they turned to for social support first and who else they turned to, two primary categories emerged: cohort members and colleagues. Cohort members referred to both those people in your own cohort and those who participants knew who were members of other cohorts. Colleagues referred to those people with whom participants worked. In regards to other sources of support, three other categories emerged: participants mentioned family, university faculty members, and friends. Family encompassed spouse/partner, parents, and children. University faculty members included dissertation committee chair, professors from various classes who students had developed a relationship with, and other faculty members from the university. Friends referred to those with whom participants had a social relationship.

***Primary sources of support.*** With respect to the support cohort members felt from other cohort members, students noted the understanding that developed amongst members as a result of this shared experience.

I feel like I got tremendous social support from the cohort. Like there was a mutual understanding of the time commitment, what you're giving up if it's your Saturdays or your weeknights. I think I would say with respect to Ph.D. program issues that I turned definitely to peers that were also in the cohort.

Another participant explained her perspective of why the cohort was her source of support.

Colleagues at school that had not gone through this, which is everybody, really couldn't really relate. It was the classmates that really knew what you were going through and it was all about time. It was all about time management and trying to make sure you got it all done. And we just held each other and convinced each other that we could do it.

A third participant compared the cohort to like being another family.

I personally got my social support from the cohort because I didn't see my family. I think sometimes it felt like I had this whole other family outside of my nuclear family, that was seeing me much more than my nuclear family was. So we became very close. So that was who we spent time with.

Another student discussed the impact the cohort and program had, as described by another student in her cohort, and why it was so important to have the support of the cohort.

[Another student] said it better than anybody else. We were talking about being in a cohort. He goes, 'You know, I used to be able to carry on a conversation with anybody about a variety of things.' He said, at this point, 'I have nothing to say to anybody. I can only talk to people in the cohort because you don't read a newspaper hardly, you don't

watch TV. If it didn't have to do with whatever class we're talking about, I couldn't carry on a coherent conversation with anyone outside the cohort.' Which made that even more important to me, you know, to have them as friends.

A member of a cohort, that is not division specific and contains people from a variety of fields and positions within the doctoral program, discussed the impact this has had on the support they give and seek from each other.

For our cohort, we have people from just ed leadership folks but multi years in one classroom so it's nice because you can go to them and say, okay, give me the low down on qualifying exams and they can just. . .where if you're going through it all as one group doing it at the same time. . .so that's been a lot of big support for me just being able to understand what the future holds.

A related piece of support from other cohort members that was discussed was the concept of cliques within the cohort. Members discussed how they were specific people, those people within their clique or group, who they would most often go to for support first. Members discussed the existence of cliques within their cohort that developed "very naturally." One member described them by saying:

I think it just depended on who you tended to gravitate toward. Whether it was folks that were in your building or maybe it was those. . .like especially folks tended to sit together because they worked in the same building. Or whether elementary folks. . . .You had a personal connection or feeder pattern or whatever it was.

These cliques developed for a variety of reasons such as level one worked in or working at the same school. Members were quick to clarify though that negativity did not exist between the groups.

Oh, yeah, there was no animosity among groups. There was no clique in our group like I couldn't go sit...like [student] and [student] and [student] sat together because they were at [school name], they were at the same high schools. But because I sat with [student] didn't mean I couldn't go sit at their table and talk or I couldn't go sit and talk with [student].

Another student described it by saying, "It was like church pews, but the difference was you felt comfortable with. . . whenever we had to work in different teams, we were comfortable working with different people." A third student explained how the cliques operated in this way:

And a lot of times, though, when we were working in teams, we chose to work with those we were with because of convenience, because of the number of hours we were already together, what our jobs required of us. It was really about convenience. Those natural connections just made it easier, but we all helped each other out whenever we needed it, on anything.

Another category that emerged when considering sources of support was that of colleagues. Some participants noted that they were supportive while others felt they were not in the sense that they had not been through this process so they did not truly understand the pressure the participant was under. One woman noted, "Colleagues at school that had not gone through this, which is everybody, really couldn't relate."

Another cohort member had a different experience with support from one of her colleagues that also highlights a kind of cohort support as well.

I was able to get support from my principal at the time because she had already completed a Ph.D. through a cohort as well so she knew exactly what I was going through and took pity on me for lack of a better phrase.



A third cohort member had a very positive experience in that the colleagues he was receiving support from were ones who had dropped out of his cohort.

I received a lot of support from peers at the school like can you cover the discipline for me so I can study for this comp or finish this paper. And they knew that I was struggling going through and continuing going through it, and they knew about others who had stopped, quit, gave up, changed, and so I was fortunate so they would say, 'Yeah, spend a couple hours.' So I received support when needed without taking a day off or a half day off so I could sit and write a paper or study for a comp.

***Secondary sources of support.*** When considering the question that asked cohort participants to think about other sources of support, three categories emerged: family, university faculty, and friends. Family encompassed spouse and children. One student described her husband's support as: "There were times when I thought, I don't think I can do this.

[Husband] was like well, 'Of course you can, look what you've done so far,' that type of thing. He was like 'just keep working, just get it done.'" Another member described her husband's support by saying:

I can tell you my husband because I don't think I would have been able to finish without my husband and his support. . . .When I'd feel like I don't know that I can keep doing this, he would be 'Yes, you can,' and very supportive.

A third member spoke to the support she received from her children by saying:

My kids were a support and encouragement. I think it meant as much to them that I do it and I finish. When I would get down, they'd be like 'Come on, it's just one more day,' and they would be encouraging, even though they knew I was getting up and leaving the house and going to [student]'s to sit and work for 8 hours.

One member used the circumstances of her children to put into perspective the stress and pressure she was under.

All three of my boys are in the Marine Corps, but they all finished high school, moved out of the house through this time period. Deployments were coming and going and I had pictures of them. . .he was in this Humvee and the picture was right there and I thought, if he can do that, I can write a paper.

Another category of support that emerged was that of university faculty, including professors who had taught cohort classes, dissertation chairs, and other faculty serving at the university. One student described her experience, “Absolutely, especially the professors that we had for more than one class. They were very easy to talk to outside of class and ask those questions and direction that you needed and just advice.”

A second student found support from her dissertation committee chair and explained her relationship with him this way:

I didn’t have anybody to reach out to for social support. Like I said, [chair] was the one.

And that was professional. . .and he’s a [state] just like me and I think that we clicked.

We just did. It was a blessing, it really was. He was fantastic, all the way around, he was.

Looking at other faculty members outside of the educational leadership program, one member identified other people she turned to for support.

I would turn to [library faulty member], I mean we had him in our cohort program, as far as another thing about support. I guess my professors, I feel like I can call on some of them. [Faculty member in another department], those that I feel like we formed a relationship with. Some of our professors I would turn to for support outside of the

members of our cohort, but some of our professors and some of the library staff, I would turn to for support.

A third category of other sources of support cohort members identified was friends.

Friends, however, were described in an unexpected manner.

I think I'm a little different because I kind of look at that and think about that and a lot of it I feel, probably if I would talk to someone, it probably would have been a friend who didn't know what I was going through, not having that experience.

Another cohort member concurred, saying: "Anybody who would listen, sat still long enough. And sometimes you just want to talk and you don't even need a response. People who don't understand, you just want to talk, just have somebody listen to you."

Thus, members found a variety of sources of support such as the cohort, colleagues, and dissertation chairs and professors, as well as from family and friends. Each of these sources helped to support the student in one way or another whether it was in a more traditional manner or nontraditional manner.

***Students offer support when needed.*** With respect to if students in the cohort supported one another when needed, two primary categories emerged: support during program milestones and support during life events. Program milestones referred to events during the course of the cohort and beyond such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, the comprehensive exams, and the concept paper submission. Life events referred to occurrences such as birth, death, promotion, etc. that happened during the course of the cohort and beyond.

***Support during program milestones.*** One member reflected back on the time leading up to taking the comprehensive exam.

When I got support from people in my cohort I was studying for comps. I'm not always a group studier. I kind of do my own thing but I think study groups for comp preparation were very helpful to me and it's probably not something I would have done if I hadn't been with the same people for 3 years and felt comfortable with them and I really knew them well. I probably would have done it on my own, so that was helpful.

Another second student concurred by saying:

The summer of comps and concept paper come to mind. That I think that was a rough summer, that was a rough summer. We were at the end. I don't think any of us really knew what to still expect, even though people had been telling us different versions of what to expect.

A third participant referred to support she received from a fellow cohort member during her dissertation process.

I know when I was working on my dissertation, when I needed an edit or to talk about some type of data analysis, I mean I would go to [student] and [student]. Everyone in our cohort knows that truthfully out of the whole group, [student] is the data guru. Not that others of us don't understand it, but if it really gets gnarly, you want to be able to talk it out with [student].

Another member reflected on the time when she was preparing to submit her IRB paperwork and the support she received from another cohort member.

[Student], I will use you as this example in the last 6 weeks. And I mean that in such a positive way. This IRB paperwork that I have finally completed and turned in and I am so excited about, I don't think that I would have had everything turned in. I know I wouldn't have had every piece turned in that was expected had you and I not had a conversation.

Because I wasn't getting that from my chair. So I relied on a cohort member and I plan to help the next person that needs that. If you call and say what again is the paperwork, and maybe by then it'll change again, who knows, but nobody else was leading me down that path and I had to rely on the cohort.

In this example and in the previous one, she also reinforces points made earlier about how the support of the cohort continued after the cohort itself had dissolved. Even though members were not seeing each other almost daily as they had been, they were still supporting one another in any way they needed, especially when they weren't getting the support they felt they should have been from the university.

Included in this category of support would also be the day-to-day support provided during the life of the cohort. One member stated, "Every single person helped in some way or another." Another said about her experience, "I could probably look at every single one of our cohort members and think of at least one experience where their words of support were the only thing that made me come back the next time. I mean truly." She went on to say about the cohort experience and how it wasn't just her cohort of origin that provided support to her:

I'm thankful to be able to say that. Even those who weren't in our cohort, again, because I had the experience of leaving and going and falling into another group of colleagues that had been through a cohort. There was a camaraderie that was there as well. And every single one of them that I experienced, it was [student] when I walk into [school] and she's like, 'What's the status?' It didn't matter. I think once you're sharing this common experience of working through this process, whether you're an independent or part of a cohort, you seek out somebody that's got a Ph.D. behind their name and you want to tell them your story and they commiserate.

Another participant concurred by saying, “And they understand. You don’t have to explain. You say one small word, IRB, they’re like ‘Oh.’ They totally know where you are and that really makes a difference.” Both this example and the previous one also illustrate the support that continues from the cohort experience, far beyond after the cohort structure has concluded.

*Support during life events.* A second category of student support that emerged from the data about this question pertained to ways the cohort supported one another through life events that occurred while in the cohort and after. One member described it as, “celebrating each other.” Another member reflected back on a variety of events that had happened in her cohort.

When I think of support, I also think of. . .I just think of positive things, like when I had the baby and everybody was happy and from the baby shower, but [student] and her husband, when he went through this issue, that summer. . . .Yeah, [student] lost her husband and the support from that. I’m thinking of tons of things that we’ve done. Or things that are outside of the program. I wanted to apply for another job and I was like hey, [student], will you sit down and talk with me and help me. And so [student] took time to sit down and help me prepare for that. So there are tons of examples that we can give, how we helped each other, in and outside of the program.

She also pointed out that support from other students during life events did not stop simply because the cohort had ended. Cohort members continued to support each other when they needed it:

I think that’s a mixed bag because [student]’s husband and me, my going for another job, those were things that were after 890. So those were after we were done with the cohort. I called on [student] when we were done with the cohort just because I had formed a

relationship with her. And I think we all reached out to [student] even after the cohort just because we had known her.

Both of these examples also highlight not only the support given and received by the cohort but also how this support helped students to better their professional lives as well as has been previously discussed. This student discussed instances in which she was able to rely on the support of someone from her county who she formed a close relationship with as a result of the cohort to help her advance her career professionally as well as the experience of another who relied on the cohort for personal issues.

**Responsibility felt for supporting fellow cohort members.** With respect to the amount of responsibility cohort members felt for supporting others in the program, two categories emerged: support during the life of the cohort, and continuing support after the cohort ended. Support during the life of the cohort refers to how members helped each other during the cohort when they sensed others needed help, both academically and socially. Support after the cohort ended, a continuing theme, is that after the cohort dissolved members still stayed in touch with one another and tried to be supportive even though they were not seeing each other regularly.

***Support during life of cohort.*** When considering support during the cohort, one category that emerged was the certain roles people played because of their strengths. One student who was well aware that people relied on her for a certain strength and viewed it very positively said:

I felt responsibility on the statistical stuff, to answer questions and be helpful, but I liked it, it felt good. There were times where I didn't really know what I was talking about and I totally faked it until I made it. But it felt good to have those people that would say, 'Hey, you know what, I know you're the one that really likes this stuff, tell me know you figured that out.' That felt really good to me.

Another student from the same cohort replied to her by saying, “And the whole SPSS stuff. The password number, all that, you were so helpful in getting all of us onboard with that. That was very helpful.” Her response acknowledged a role that the cohort saw her playing, “And I felt like that was my responsibility. I feel like it was [your] responsibility to keep us organized.”

Another student from a different cohort who also realized the role she played within her cohort explained her viewpoint.

I think there was always someone that was dominant in a group. For example, like with SPSS. For example, I took that class twice. I noticed that when I took it the second time, I was a whole lot more knowledgeable than those who were taking it for the first time. And they really, really leaned on me for support. Explain this to me, explain that to me, how did you get this, how did you get that. And I was able to do that. So yeah, I felt. . .I didn’t feel obligated to support them, but it was just something you do as a human being. These are your people, you support them, you help them understand.

This student’s comment also brings out another theme that emerged in the category of support during the cohort: the higher emotional intelligence of members of a cohort. Cohort members were more tuned into one another because they spent so much time together and were all experiencing a relatively stressful event in their lives. One group member described a situation with other cohort members in which one felt responsible for supporting another but there was no reciprocation on the part of the other member.

I think, at least I like to think, that there’s a relatively high emotional intelligence among the group. I think that others became perceptive of that. When you care about others, then people will step in. And I think there were times when maybe a situation on someone, it



was taxing another member in the cohort, where a third member would kind of step in. Because you're pressed when you're doing this, you're pressed, and there are only so much of you to give. I think there were a couple of times that I saw others kind of step in, like a third person step in. By that I mean, maybe there were two people that had a particularly strong relationship, where the first one was leaning on the second, but the second really didn't have a whole lot to give and a third person would kind of step in and help out.

Another participant of the same cohort described the responsibility the one person felt as, "...the extreme emotional, mental exhaustion that you will feel in giving, giving, giving, giving. You can listen, your brain gets tired." However, the previous participant went on to explain the situation of how the whole cohort felt a responsibility for this person and also felt a responsibility for the person who was being leaned on heavily by saying:

But I also feel that number one, that we cared about [student], and number two, we knew things about [student] that made us more sympathetic and understanding, to try and support her and get her through, but also to try and support others and kind of spread it around, so that it was tolerable. I think it was probably one of the more caring things that our cohort did.

There were also other instances in other cohorts of students feeling responsible for one another that were of a more reciprocal nature. One student explained it by saying, "Because if there was carrying, I think it was already okay because it needed to be done."

Another student elaborated on her comment and said:

I think we felt comfortable holding. . . either holding someone accountable or I'm going to do this for you this time, but you owe me one. You didn't feel resentment towards

anyone if they had something else going on because we knew we would pick up the slack at another time.

A third student described it by saying, “I just never really felt that somebody was taking advantage. Did sometimes we have to carry and sometimes I had to be carried? Yes.” There was not animosity amongst the group for any acknowledged extra support members may have needed from time to time. Instead, they viewed it as sometimes someone else needs it and sometimes you need it. To expect to be given that support, you need to be willing to give it too. One woman explained her view of that extra support as:

So there’s a balance. And I think there’s times that you’re frustrated but I think our cohort was very respectful of each other and realized that there’s times when I’m . . .and there’s times when I’m the leader. But I do feel I would say a commitment to almost everyone in my cohort, that if you call, if you need me, if you need a push. . . .

In a cohort that is not division specific, one member explained how he feels this may have an impact on them not leaning on each other in the manner described by other cohorts. Instead, in group work, for example, they all work together because their situation does not allow for anyone to do less than the others.

I think the easiest thing it seemed like for us was whenever we had group assignments for just us in our smaller group, we always got together. We did it more as a group. We didn’t divide things up. Maybe part of it was that it was tough for us to communicate in other ways. You know, we have [county], we have the city, we have the [school], we have [county]. And you know I can’t check my [university] email during the day thanks to [his] county. There’s no easy form of communication so we had to work around our class schedule, especially with people traveling far distances.

*Support after dissolution of cohort.* Another category that emerged regarding the responsibility students feel for supporting one another in the program is the extending to after the cohort has dissolved. Cohort students spoke of continuing to keep in touch with one another making a point of being aware when someone was at a critical point and needed support. One student said:

One of them I know needs a push and I call probably every 3 weeks to just make sure you hear my voice, you know that I'm on top of you and that when you're ready to go, when you're ready to move. . . .I'm just going to keep going. I'm not going to let you forget about it.

Another student in the same cohort reflected similar feelings and stated, "So we're still helping each other. . . .at least I know [student] and I have spent more time figuring out who's not done for who do you need to reach out to." This is a theme that has continued across categories of questions—the continuing of support even after the cohort has ended and students are working independently.

Thus, students have indicated that they feel a level of responsibility for supporting others in their program. During the cohort's existence, they have explained how they rely on one another or certain people who have certain strengths in certain areas in which they need help. They have also discussed how they have felt responsible for various types of relationship within the cohort that may have been draining on certain members. Participants have acknowledged that sometimes people need to be supported and other times they themselves need support and as a group they are willing to give this. Other cohorts that are structured differently have discussed that they cannot lean on each other in this manner, instead everyone must carry their own weight.

Finally, the feeling of responsibility has continued even after the cohort has ended. Members remain aware of one another and where they are in their dissertation and if they need support.

*Giving and receiving of similar amounts of support.* When considering the question pertaining to whether cohort members felt that they had received and given similar amounts of support, or if they felt that they had experienced a lot more or a lot less than others, the overarching category was that there were different levels for different people.

*Varying levels of support.* The group participants' perceptions were that some people gave more and some gave less. For instance, one member discussed a situation in which one member was receiving a lot more than she was giving and the members of the cohort felt compelled to give support to the giver in order to deal with this relationship.

I think there was one person in our group that was more competitive than anybody else.

And the person she leaned on was so gracious about things. And I think other people, like what you were saying, intervened to try to help that situation of hey, don't let her lean on you so much, give it back to her. Say look, you've got to take this or whatever. But that level of competitiveness I think was probably just. . .it changed the dynamics of the groups, too, when we did group things.

Another member of this same cohort responded that he had felt really guilty about that relationship and feeling like the other cohort member was being taken advantage of so much and was giving so much more than she was receiving.

Along a similar vein, a member of another cohort talked about feeling like he had given so much more than others in his group had and as a result, he did not feel like he had as rich of an experience as he could have.

In my cohort, there were times when central office people were either too busy answering emails and not paying attention to the discussion so their contributions to the discussion were almost nothing or very minimal so I felt almost cheated. So like wait a minute, we could have really had a decent conversation if you would have done the reading and listened to the professor. When we were doing like group work it was like you know, I'm doing all the work. . .or there were times when a couple of us were doing all the work and then it seemed to be because we were a cohort, they knew like well, he knows the statistics or she knows the \_\_\_\_ so we can just ask them about it because that's their strength. So they wouldn't have to build their own strength so they could just rest on their laurels.

In sharing this, this cohort member was also expressing another side of a previously discussed questioned in that certain people felt responsible for playing certain roles within the group because of their strengths. He felt as though he was contributing his strength to support his classmates but was not getting anything in return.

A different perspective of the giving and receiving of support was offered by a female member of a different cohort. Another member wondered out loud if people would say he had helped support them as they had supported him. The female member reminded him of how the group had counted on his comic relief. She said:

You know what, though, that's one model of supporting others. And so that was actually a really big deal for me, was that you were always there to kind of lighten the mood, when it was feeling like I can't do this again. I could look at you and go, 'You're going to say something that's going to be completely out of left field and I'm going to get it and

we're going to be fine.' So your support model looked different, depending on what they had to give.

Thus, cohort participants felt that, in terms of level of support given and received, there were different levels for different people. Some gave more than others gave, either through competition, through neediness, or through not carrying their weight in the group. There were also varying models of support that group members gave one another. It did not always have to be the traditional model for it to be what was needed.

In conclusion, when reflecting upon the social support offered by the cohort structure, students again focused on the support of the cohort itself. They indicated that the people they turned to first for support when needed were their fellow cohort members. The support that students offered one another encompassed not only during the life of the cohort but also after it had dissolved. Students supported and relied on one another through milestones in the program as well as in life itself. Members felt a level of responsibility for supporting one another and continuing to support each other after they left the structure. For members, the support did not end when the cohort ended.

### **Sharing Information and Resources**

In order to gain a better understanding of how cohort members share information and resources, focus group members were asked to consider four questions: When they have had questions about an assignment, how have they found the answers to their questions; if anyone has ever asked them questions about an assignment; how have they found the answers to questions or concerns about the program structure or requirements; how typical do they feel their experience has been compared with those of cohort members in general.

**Finding answers to questions about assignments.** When examining participants' responses related to how they found answers to questions about an assignment, three primary categories emerged: cohort members, syllabus, and university sources of information. Cohort members refer to the people in their cohort who could provide answers to their questions. Syllabus refers to the outline of the course and assignment requirements for the semester given by the professor at the beginning of the semester. University resources refer to either professors or the syllabus of the class.

*Cohort members.* With respect to fellow cohort members serving as a source of information, one student shared her experience in previous degree programs compared with doing this program in a cohort.

I would say that a difference for me was when I went through and did my master's and my post-master's, I was not in a cohort. And so if I had a question about an assignment, I almost always went directly to the instructor. That was really my only resource in those cases versus. . . because I knew everybody's email address and I had their email. Just okay, just let me email [student]. And so part of that was just ease. And then what's your interpretation of what does the instructor want. That you don't have when you're not in a cohort.

Another student from the same cohort shared how she used a cohort member's help during her dissertation process.

I just remember, like going through the dissertation process, like when I needed to just talk through like a section or a paragraph, okay, [student] let's take a lap. And we'd walk around the building and she'd just listen to me sort of talk it out and then I'd come in and. . .so definitely think cohort members turn to each other for help.

Through analysis of the data, a subgroup emerged regarding how students found their answers to questions. It often seemed as though, in the cohort, there was a “go to” person who the group seemed to rely on for either having the answer or finding the answer to the question. One student explained the use of the go to person in his cohort.

I think that a lot of it, we had an assignment, we were able to discuss it with others, at least I feel like somebody usually had a handle on it. Or nobody had a handle on it and somebody took the lead and asked the question. . . somebody took the lead. Usually what comes to mind is [student], because she was usually a few weeks ahead of anything I was doing, so she would be kind of like, okay, I see you have this assignment here and you have this, can you explain that a little more.

Another student, who was considered the go to person in her cohort, explained how it worked in her cohort and how she viewed it in a positive manner.

I think we had some of that and I think there were people who were the go to people for like you said, certain subjects, because that was their area of strength. I think it’s actually nice. . . think it’s nice to get to know someone well enough that you have a pretty good idea of where their strengths lie and you can benefit from getting their helps if they’re willing to give it.

**Syllabus.** Another category that emerged in reference to this question was that some students didn’t rely on the go to person; instead, they followed the syllabus for the class provided by the instructor.

I followed the syllabus to the T, even though they altered assignments. I followed the syllabus to the T because I have a huge fear of following the rules that are laid out in writing and having the rules change. So I followed the rules as they were written and



didn't question the assignments. I didn't feel like it was my place to question the assignments. They had written it down, I didn't do any negotiating on assignments. I felt like it's written here and I'm going to answer the questions exactly as they put them forward because I honestly don't have the time to do it three times.

***Professorial support.*** Another student addressed the third category that emerged as a source of clarification for assignments: the professor. He said in his cohort:

For us, it depended on the class and the assignment. For a larger assignment, we may ask each other and be like we need to ask the professor. We don't want to totally blow it. And it seemed like the professors were good about getting us phone numbers that weren't necessarily listed. . . knowing our situation. We are not on campus and didn't necessarily have access to [university] email so then it was good that in the middle of a group project, someone would just pull out their phone and call a professor with a question and off we'd go.

Although this student focused mostly on the support the professor provided for clarification to questions, he first referenced the cohort. Members asked each other questions first, before they went to the professor.

**Fellow cohort questions about assignments.** When asked to reflect on if anyone had ever asked them questions about an assignment, student shared several instances pertaining to situations when they were able to serve as a resource for their classmates. One student shared an example that also illustrates the trust that exists between cohort members.

I had someone in our cohort who had not completed a class and it had been oh, close to 2 years, and he called and it's like I can't remember this assignment and what not. And I'm like. . . he's not doing the same thing I am and I know his standard and I said hold on, I

said, ‘I will shoot you my paper so that it kind of blows the cobwebs out of what the purpose of the paper was.’ And that was a way I could help him. It gave him the framework that he needed to complete that, so he could get back on track.

Another student in the same cohort shared an example of when she was able to help answer questions for a fellow cohort member.

I can remember one particular member of our cohort who got a paper returned that had some issues and it just happened that we were working in close proximity at that point in time. And she gave it to me and said, ‘What’s going on here? We talked it out and I said, ‘Well, I think this is where I would take this. . .’ and was able to work it out.

Thus, students relied on each other not only as a source of information for questions they may have had, but also trusted one another enough to rely on their answers. Members spent so much time together and got to know each other so well that they knew who to go to for support in certain areas and that they were knowledgeable in their answers.

**Addressing questions or concerns about program structure/requirements.** When examining participants’ responses concerning how they found answers to questions or concerns about the program structure or requirements, two categories emerged: university resources and cohort members. University resources is a category that encompasses people and documents or items associated with the university that may have provided answers. Cohort members referred to both people in their own cohort and those in other cohorts.

**University resources.** Within the category of university resources, there were two subcategories of data: faculty members and program materials. In regards to faculty members, one member discussed her relationship with her dissertation chair as someone she went to when she had questions or concerns about the program or its requirements.

I had a really strong chair. I had Dr. [professor] as my chair who is very helpful in that aspect. This is the room you need to go to, this is who you need to talk to, and these are the forms you need to get for planning the prospectus date, getting the technology. Maybe that's on an individual basis as a chair or whatever support you had. But because I had such a strong support in him, I felt like I had some direction.

Another focus group participant shared a similar relationship with her chair and described it as:

Well, again, my chair if I ever needed anything, any of those questions regarding the structure of what did I need for my prospectus or dissertation, he was the one that took me the information I needed. If I had a question . . . it was mostly Dr. [professor]) mostly my chair.

Other members of the focus group shared their experiences with getting information from the Office of Doctoral Studies. One student shared that this office and her chair helped her the most.

Then when [director] and [assistant] came, they were godsend for point people to run things by. So all along a continuum. And my chair is the closest person to me. . . because she was more than. . . it was like a life teacher, not just dissertation chair. It was more all-encompassing.

Another student shared a similar experience with her chair and the Office of Doctoral Studies.

Dr. [director] has been able to answer a lot of questions that I've had. I took a leave of absence when my daughter was born. So just taking things to her. And my dissertation chair, they've been my two people that I've had questions answered. . . I've gone through them. I don't know who I would have asked questions to before them."

Students also identified administrative assistants in the program who they relied on for answers to their questions. One student said:

She was like the one. . .but [administrative assistant] would always, if she didn't know the answer, she wouldn't send you around. She would find the answer and call you back. And she was the one person that was always willing to fight through the red tape to get whatever you needed and get back to you.

Another participant identified the director of the Ph.D. program in educational leadership as a source of support to the cohorts in regards to program requirement questions.

I think we were lucky to have Dr. [director] coordinate our program because he's real good about getting information out to us in a timely manner. As soon as something changes, we know about it and he gives us the long-term view and he keeps that out there for us to go back to. He's real good about getting our feedback about the program if we want things changed or if we'd like things changed. He at least tries. At least listens to us.

The other category that emerged in regards to who provides answers to questions about program requirements is program materials. The first type that was identified by focus group participants was the Ph.D. handbook which provides all procedural and structural information students need for their program. One student spoke about the importance of the handbook to her, "Keeping that handbook right on my desktop. I'd go back and read and reread and reread. What margins? All that picky stuff that matters so much to somebody. I just wanted the big picture, not every semicolon. . . ." Another student stated about her reliance on the handbook, "I felt confident in. . .because I knew which handbook and I know that it was, like it goes back when you started." A third student stated that the Ph.D. handbook provided "our rules" and that she "went back to the handbook, the 60 hour program, which is what we enrolled in. "

The other piece of the university materials category encompasses information sessions that the department held at various points in the program. For example, Doctoral Day was held for all students. During this day, the programs requirements were discussed, students were able to meet all faculty members and learn about their research interests, and a variety of other aspects of the program were covered. There were also information sessions held about the comprehensive exam and what to expect from the questions and the exam itself. About the usefulness of these sessions in answering questions, one student said:

Most of those answers came from that seminar they had us go to twice. It was a full day and they gave you a timeline of which things need to happen, and then right before comps we had this seminar and we broke up into groups and one room we went into and we actually discussed these are the kind of questions you'll see on the quantitative and qualitative. I don't think it was mandatory that we went but it was in your best interest to go and that's when most of our questions were answered. We definitely got answers there.

A student from another cohort had a different view on the usefulness of the information sessions in answering questions.

I know when we were coming up on concept paper, I think it was a Saturday session, where they had one meeting, but I don't think there was a whole lot of notice about that coming into it. When I went down there and sat down there and there were a couple of us and there was pretty good information, but it was just kind of like, here's the surprise and there's something that might be thrown together or something to try and help you figure out what it is and then you kind of start digging more to get to it. As I hear a lot of

talking, I think it seems like with the program you would like something a little more structured, a little clearer map.

***Cohort members.*** The second major category that emerged from the data as a way to find answers to questions or concerns about the program requirements was cohort members. Participants reported using either their own cohort members or members from other cohorts as a way to answer their questions. One student described her reliance on the people in her cohort, “The people in my cohort who would walk through it with me. Like I relied on [student] and [student] tremendously through the prospectus process because they had just done it.”

Another student reported how she got answers to questions from people outside of her own cohort as well.

A lot of information that I got was in the midst of a phone call. Somebody would say, ‘Did you fill out the so and so?’ ‘The what?’ ‘The so and so.’ ‘Oh, no I didn’t get it, where do I find that?’ ‘You didn’t get the website? I’ll email it to you.’ And that’s how I got a great deal of my information, just from casual conversations with somebody that happened to say did you happen to fill out. . . .And these were people that weren’t in the cohort, this is the kind of people who were in other cohorts.

**Typicality of cohort experience.** When examining participants’ responses to how typical they felt their experience was compared to that of cohort members in general, two major categories emerged: those who found the experience to be similar and those who found it to be different. In regards to similarities, this category contains subcategories of past cohort experiences, professional benefits members found, and problems they all faced as a result of the cohort structure. In regards to differences, there are differences based on past cohort experiences and the new structure of cohorts at this university.

*Similar experiences.* Within the subcategory of past cohort experiences, one participant reflected back on her experiences in another cohort prior to this one and stated:

I can just compare the two cohort experiences. They were similar in nature in terms of the collegial relationships that you develop and the support that you have. I still keep in touch with my [other university] cohort members, some of them, just like I still keep in touch with some of the [county] cohort members. Because of the bond, just like [participant] said, the bond that you form. You're all going through a tumultuous time together and like [participant] said earlier, when you're together that long, you go through births and deaths and divorces and weddings and we ran the gamut of everything that individuals could go through, emotionally as well, while we were going through this experience. It was good because of each other.

Another member stated in terms of the experience he had compared with the experience of others in his cohort:

And I feel like most of the people in the cohort would probably go to bat for each other, in a way that mimics what [student] was saying there. Where you know people on another level, which is not as strong and might not be the case.

Based on this, he went on to consider his cohort's experience as compared to those of other cohorts.

I'd like to think that our cohort was special, but I imagine a lot of people going through cohorts feel similarly. Our bond is probably unique from their bond, but I imagine they probably. . . others in other cohorts feel similarly bonded.

A third student stated in terms of similarity, about the experience she and other students in her cohort had with one another.

Our experience is that we kind of became a family. Since those have graduated or are still in the program, we still meet every Christmas for lunch together, we still meet every fall, spring, and summer. We get together for some cohort event. We're very supportive of those who are currently in the dissertation process. We're their cheerleaders behind them.

Thus, if the members of her cohort did not feel that they had had a similar experience as another and received similar amount of support, they would not be continuing to make the effort to remain close to one another and offer support through the remaining program milestones.

Another subcategory of the similarities category is the professional benefits members have found as a result of being a member of a cohort. One member noted the networking benefits he felt.

One of the things I noted was networking and I feel like they're stronger bonds. If we were in a cohort with another person in our school, I don't think it was beyond that. I think there might be been two people in the same location and some did change, but there are people in other districts and I know them and know them well now.

Another member who changed jobs and as a result, counties, during the cohort felt that she also received professional benefits.

I will tell you that because I had the unique experience of changing jobs while in the midst of this, being a member of a cohort in a Ph.D. program gave me special status with the place that I landed in. The people that had been involved in that cohort are a very tightly knit group. . .tightly knit to the point that I would say it's really almost like a little secret club. . .and they're in the highest of positions. So I would say that it was really beneficial for me professionally to have been a part of the Ph.D. program and to have been a cohort member, even that it wasn't a cohort member for that group. Because it was



like they immediately recognized me as a little wandering sheep and said you belong with us. And it made my professional experience all that much better.

Members also noted a more negative aspect to having a similar experience to those in the cohort—having everyone reach the same milestones at the same time. One member explained it this way, “This process, like the examples we were talking about, so many people finishing at the same time, with not so many people to be available to be chairs. . .it’s very, very disorganized.”

The issue of all students, or at least a majority of students, reaching the same points—comprehensive exam, choosing dissertation chairs and committees, was previously mentioned as an issue experienced by the group. Thus, the cohort members were having similar experiences but not necessarily in a positive way. Another student stated:

I do think that some of that is that we were coddled so much the whole way through, until we hit 890. Well, actually until comps. And then you were kind of thrown out there. And we were even split up for 890. And I think our cohort would have done better if someone had been willing to take on 20 people for 890. We would have suffered through that to stay together because I think it would have made a positive difference for the group. But they splintered us up and mixed other people in.

***Difference experiences.*** The second major category for this question pertained to students who felt that they had had different experiences as compared to other cohort students. In regards to having a different experience in this cohort than in previous cohorts, one student stated:

Well, I was also in a cohort for, actually for my master’s and for my post masters. I had almost a cohort. A lot of the same folks went class to class and I do think with the Ph.D. program, the bonds were stronger. I do think the bonds developed with that group were

stronger. I don't know if it was the intensity of the program. I don't know what to attribute that to but I think in this experience compared with even the other experiences I've had, that I really did get to know most people better and develop the stronger social support.

One member, when reflecting on a previous cohort experience she had had as compared with this one stated, "We are a family. Our cohort truly is the family." Another member who felt he had had a different experience because of his cohort and was aware of the closeness of other cohorts said:

I heard that and felt really, at times, let down or jealous of that cohort who were that tight. Maybe ours was too big to start with so we almost had factions within it. . . so I had at times heard about how close some cohorts were and it had to just have been the personality and just formed that type of bond.

A cohort member who is a member of a nondivision specific cohort felt that his experience was rather different from others in the group because of the effects of the way his cohort was structured. "I think our cohort in that it's unique in that we have people in other tracks and we have people from all different work experiences and then we're together for some courses and we're separate for other groups."

In conclusion, when reflecting on the sharing of information and resources during the cohort, students again identified their fellow cohort members as who they went to for questions about assignments or about the program structure or requirements. They did identify people in the university community as sources of information but more as secondary sources. In reflecting on the typicality of their experience, members often compared it to previous cohorts they had

participated in and found similar benefits, both professionally and socially, as well as differences.

### **Connection of Survey and Focus Group Findings**

In conducting this study, two different methods of inquiry were used, quantitative and qualitative methods. A survey was initially sent to 75 past and present cohort participants in a doctoral educational leadership program. The results of this survey were used to guide and inform the questions that were asked of focus group participants. Three focus groups consisting of 15 total participants were held, during which cohort members provided more in-depth data about their cohort experiences.

With respect to the results of the survey data, there were two significant differences found. First, a significant difference was noted in the Trust Within the Cohort factor between the first-year cohort and the seventh-year cohort, and between the seventh-year cohort and the ninth-year cohort. Of the three, the seventh-year cohort was found to be the most significantly different with a higher mean in terms of level of Trust Within the Cohort.

A member of the seventh-year cohort participated in a focus group and the data she shared about her cohort experience supports this finding. She discussed how as a group they grew extremely close and she attributed this closeness to several factors. She discussed how the cohort was made up of members from all levels—elementary, middle, and high school as well as central office. She noted that there was not an overwhelming number of central office members so there was not a feeling of being watched by these people. Instead, she felt as though these members learned from those in the classroom or school and vice versa which enriched the experience for all.

She also pointed out that there were people from all walks of life in the cohort—single, married, married with young children, married with grown children, etc. During their cohort, they also experienced three marriages and four babies being born. As a cohort and after the dissolution of the cohort, they trained for marathons together, continue to get together several times a year for lunch during holiday seasons, attend one another's graduations, and support those moving through the dissertation process. These are all very familial type events the group experienced together which contributed to their trust for one another. Finally, she noted that of the 13 remaining members of the cohort at the end, 12 of them were female which she felt contributed a great deal to the close nature of the cohort. Thus, focus group findings does support the significant differences found for the seventh-year cohort in terms of level of Trust Within the Group.

The second significant finding was a difference between the 48 hour cohort model and the 60 hour cohort model in terms of their General Cohort Experience. The 60 hour cohort members were found to be more satisfied with their cohort experience than those in the 48 hour cohort. Of note, only one person from the three 48 hour cohorts participated in any of the three focus groups, whereas 14 people from 60 hour cohorts participated. This lack of participation could be attributed to members of the 48 hour cohorts being less satisfied with their experience than those in 60 hour cohorts.

In terms of differences by student characteristics and focus group findings, there were no significant differences found by gender for any of the four factors nor were there was difference found by race. In regards to age and years in education, no significant differences were found for any of the four factors either. Thus, it does not appear to be anything about the students themselves that has an impact on having a positive cohort experience.

In conclusion, the three major findings of the survey were supported by the findings of the focus groups. First, it does seem as though the level of trust that was found to be higher within the seventh-year cohort was in fact significantly different. Members of this cohort extended their experience with one another both during and after the cohort ended. Second, the 48 hour cohorts seem to be less satisfied with their experience than those in the 60 hour cohorts as evidenced by their lack of participation in the focus groups. Third, the lack of significant findings in terms of student characteristics was supported by focus group findings in that no participants shared that they felt they had a more or less positive experience because of their gender, race, age, or years in education. Thus, overall general attitudes about the cohort experience suggest that it was a positive one for participants.

## **CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

As a method of conclusion, Chapter 5 provides summarizing remarks about this study which was centered on one primary question concerning how cohort members experienced the cohort structure of the educational leadership doctoral program at one university. As a way to address this question, four sub-questions were examined: (a) What are cohort members' attitudes toward the cohort? (b) Do attitudes toward the cohort structure differ by student characteristics? (c) How does the cohort structure support students while in the program? (d) Does the cohort structure produce mutual academic and intellectual stimulation of members (through the critiquing and sharing of materials, ideas, and resources) or does it foster an atmosphere of social dependence and stifle intellectual growth? Implications for the continued growth of the use of the cohort structure in the doctoral educational leadership program at the university studied are included. Additionally, suggestions for future areas of research on the use of the cohort structure in these types of programs are discussed.

### **What Are Cohort Members' Attitudes Toward the Cohort?**

With respect to doctoral students' attitudes toward the cohort, when one examines the survey data, it seems as though students generally have had a positive experience as a member of a cohort. Four factors were measured by the survey: students' General Cohort Experience, Trust Within the Cohort, Network, and sense of Community of Learners.

The General Cohort Experience referred to the students' perspective of their overall experience as members of a cohort. The questions that measured this factor asked students to

consider aspects of the structure in terms of how it affected their feeling as part of the program, how it contributed to their academic success, fostered the development of trust and respect among members, if it exaggerated the significance of minor student dissatisfaction, and if it was overall a positive experience. According to survey data, the mean score of students' experience was a 3.0317 on a scale of one to four, with a median score of 3.2000. The mode score was 3.40 and a standard deviation of .58755. During focus groups, students discussed how they had relied on and supported one another both academically and socially as well as that they felt comfortable in doing so. Students generally found that being a member of a cohort was a positive experience for them.

The factor that measured Trust Within the Cohort referred to students' perceptions about if or how they trusted their fellow cohort members. Questions that measured this factor asked them to consider if they felt like an outsider in the cohort, if they felt it encouraged the development of cliques, if it encouraged and supported the free expression of varying viewpoints, if it fostered the development of trust and respect amongst members, and if they overall they had a positive experience as a member. According to survey data, the mean was 2.9634 on a scale of 1 to 4, with a median score of 3.000. The mode score was 3.00 and a standard deviation of .54360. During focus groups, students shared that they felt that cliques did exist within the cohort but that they were of a more positive or convenient nature instead of a negative factor as they are normally. They did not feel that cliques divided or separated the cohort and that members felt comfortable moving between them. They also shared that they felt that there was not a tremendous amount of diversity of thought amongst cohort members as they knew each so well that they did not need to either discuss issues or did not want to offend classmates with differing viewpoints. Students did report though that they trusted their fellow

group members and felt respect from and for them while in the cohort. While the mean score was slightly lower than the General Cohort Experience mean score, it seems as though members felt there was a fairly high level of trust within the cohort amongst members.

The factor that measured Network asked students to consider their feelings about the cohort being an opportunity for them to build their professional networks and build their professional skills. It asked them to consider if they felt like the contacts they had made would help to open future doors for them, if their relationships would help them to advance in the future or enhance their professional standing or success in the future, or if they felt like their cohort relationships would provide no professional networking benefits or no advantages when applying for positions. The mean score here was the lowest of the four factors of 2.7285 on a scale of 1 to 4, with a median score of 2.6667. The mode score was 3.000 and a standard deviation of .53399. During focus groups, students discussed how they felt the relationships they had formed in their cohort had helped them to build their skills as a professional and become better at their jobs. They also shared how they had relied on relationships made in the cohort to advance their careers. Overall, students felt that networking was a benefit of having participated in a cohort, just not as strong of a benefit as the other factors.

The final factor, Community of Learners, refers to students' perceptions of the cohort as being a group of learners. The questions asked them to consider if they felt like they were a part of a group, felt close to other students, and felt welcome and comfortable in classes. It also asked them if they were comfortable expressing their opinions in class and if they felt they could rely on other students help if they needed support in their courses. The mean score of this factor was 3.1854 on a scale of 1 to 4, with a median score of 3.000. The mode score was 3.000 and with a standard deviation of .45911. This was the most highly rated factor of the four. Focus group



participants also shared how they felt they could go to one another when support was needed and how they viewed their cohort as a second family. They developed relationships that extended beyond the cohort, both during its lifespan as well as after it dissolved. They did note a lack of diversity in thought but reported they felt comfortable giving and receiving support in their cohort. Students seemed to feel that they were a part of a group of learners who could rely on one another if needed.

Overall, based on survey data, students reported that they generally had a positive cohort experience. They felt that they trusted their fellow cohort members both academically and socially. They felt that the relationships they developed while in the cohort were ones they could depend on to help them advance professionally in the future. The support they felt from their cohort had extended far beyond when the cohort dissolved. They relied on and offered each other support, both academically and socially, during the dissertation stage as well as for support in regards to advancement professionally. They reported feeling as though they were part of a community of learners and felt comfortable within this setting. Focus group participants discussed how much they felt they had grown in regards to their professional skills and abilities through their interactions with their fellow cohort members. Finally, they indicated that they felt the cohort contributed to their academic success and helped to foster the development of trust and respect amongst members.

### **Do Attitudes Toward the Cohort Structure Vary by Student Characteristics?**

The survey asked students to share some demographic information about themselves. Specifically, they were asked to share their gender, race, cohort status (in which cohort they had been or were a member), age, and number of years in education. Participants were asked to share

this information so as to determine if student attitudes about the cohort structure varied by these characteristics.

In terms of gender, there were no significant differences found for any of the four factors the survey measured. Thus, students did not feel that they had a more or less positive experience because they were male or female. With respect to race, again no significant differences were found. Students did not feel their needs were met more or less because of their race.

With respect to cohort status, there were significant differences found between three of the cohorts in terms of the Trust Within the Cohort Factor ( $f = 3.157, p = .009$ ). It was found that there were differences between the first-year cohort and the seventh-year cohort and between the seventh-year cohort and the ninth-year cohort. The median score of the first-year cohort members as related to Trust Within the Cohort Factor was 2.5625, and the median score for the seventh-year cohort was 3.8750. The median score for the ninth-year cohort was 2.5000. Thus, of the three cohorts, the seventh-year cohort was the most significantly different of the three with a higher mean score in terms of level of Trust Within the Cohort as compared to the first-year and the ninth-year cohort.

From the information participants supplied pertaining to which cohort they were a member of, the researcher was also able to determine if they were a member of a 48 hour (nondistrict specific) cohort or a member of a 60 hour (district specific) cohort. There was a significant difference (of  $p = .048$ ) found between the two types of cohorts in terms of General Cohort Experience. The mean score for the 48 hour cohort students was 2.8929 and the score for the 60 hour cohort was 3.2364. Thus, the 60 hour cohort students report being more satisfied with the cohort experience than those students in a 48 hour cohort. It is important to keep in mind when considering this difference that 60 credit hour cohorts generally have between 15 and

20 members whereas 48 credit hour cohorts are much smaller with only five to six members.

Thus members may also be responding to the size difference in cohorts. Additional data regarding this would prove to be more useful.

Finally, with respect to age and years in education, no significant differences were found for any of the four factors. Thus, being a certain age or having worked in education for a certain number of years does not seem to make a significant difference on students' cohort experience.

Overall, there were significant differences found by student characteristics for only two areas, Trust Within the Cohort in terms of cohort membership, and type of cohort. Members of one specific cohort indicated that Trust Within in the Cohort was much higher as compared to another cohort. Also, members of the 60 hour cohort indicated they were more satisfied with their General Cohort Experience than those in the 48 hour cohort.

### **How Does the Cohort Structure Support Students While in the Program?**

According to research by Seifert and Mandzuk (2006), cohorts promote the forming of supportive social connections between members, and it is hoped that these ties will endure after the cohort has dissolved. In order for a lasting relationship to develop though, such elements as peer support and mutual respect must be present (Norris et al., 1996). Participants in this study offered data that strongly supports these constructs. Members spoke of the mutual understanding that develops between cohort members as they go through this process. They understand what the other is giving up in order to participate in this degree program and what it means to go through this process, both physically and emotionally. Members constantly turn to one another for support throughout the life of their cohort. As a result, members describe their cohort as being like a second family to them. The communication system that develops between "the family" or members is quite extensive. Students frequently indicated that when they had

questions, they first asked one another before they asked a professor or committee member because of the level of trust that existed.

One finding that was revealed during the data collection process was the existence of cliques, which had not previously been reported in the literature on cohorts. Within the cohort, smaller groups or cliques developed. These cliques may contain people who work in the same school, at the same level, within the same subject, etc. These people also tended to always sit together during class and complete group work together. However, while the concept of a clique usually has a negative connotation, the cohorts viewed them as a positive development and indicated that there was no negativity between certain groups of people and it was understood that if they needed support from someone outside of their clique, they could go to them. Thus, these cliques seemed to build support to the cohort as a whole rather than weaken it into warring factions.

When considering Seifert and Mandzuk's (2006) intent for the relationships developed within cohorts to continue even after the cohort has ended, data strongly supported this concept. Participants spoke often about how, even after their cohort had broken up, they still turned to one another for support through life events. Members supported each other through births, deaths, divorces, job promotions, and marriages. They also relied on each other for information concerning various program milestones such as concept paper submission, comprehensive exams, etc. They reached out to their former cohort members in times of need, both professionally and personally. In doing so, they also continued to offer them support and encouragement academically to complete their dissertations. Members who had finished spoke of how they spent time trying to figure out who was finished and who had not so that they could

make a concerted effort to stay in contact with that person to continue to offer them support and assistance.

This could potentially be because of the jarring change that the dissolution of the cohort results in for members. They spend 4 years together in an extremely stressful situation and a strong bond develops between members. While in the cohort, they move through the program together. To lose that support and be on your own can be especially hard for some members who have grown used to and need that structure. One student described it as, “I feel like I have lost my barometer.” Thus, members who have finished make the effort to continue to support those who have not because they realize they need it.

This concerted effort of support could also happen as a result of the level of support students feel they do not receive from the department or their dissertation committee. Students discussed to a great degree the lack of support they feel they received from those who they felt should provide it after the cohort ended. When students did not feel they received support from their chair, they turned to each other—to those people they trusted to help them when they needed it. Thus, this support was then passed on from one member to the next as they progressed through the dissertation process.

Interestingly enough, one source of support that was not found in the literature was support between cohorts. Students often shared how they sought or received support from people who had been in other cohorts. These were often people they worked with in a professional capacity or people they happened to befriend outside of the program. They used the other cohort members, especially those who had been in earlier cohorts, as a repository of information about program milestones such as the comprehensive exam, concept paper submission, dissertation

committee selection, prospectus process, etc. Thus, the support that develops during the cohort not only lasts within that cohort after it has dissolved but also crosses into other cohorts as well.

Teitel (1997) wrote about the idea of students feeling boxed into certain positions within the cohort and not being able to break out of those roles. Closely related to this was the idea of the go to person within the group. There were certain people who were known as the person to go to if one had questions about data analysis or a statistical analysis program or questions about assignments or procedures. This study found mixed data regarding this issue. Several people identified themselves as being the go to person within the group and stated that they rather enjoyed it. They did not view it as a negative label; instead, they saw it in a positive way. They felt that this label resulted from the members of the cohort knowing one another so well that they knew this about each other. These people indicated they felt a positive responsibility towards the group in their role and made efforts to fulfill it.

Although why this occurs was not discussed by Teitel (1997) or found in any of the other literature, one might hypothesize that based on previous findings about how and why the cohort supports one another so strongly, it may occur because members feel they are not receiving the support they need from the professor or the department so they find their own solutions within the group. It may also occur because cohort students are not on campus students. Thus, they do not see their professors with the same frequency and it may be easier and more convenient to reach out to a fellow cohort member than it is to a professor.

Barnett et al. (2000) found that because cohort students spend so much time together and are so strongly bonded, the personal problems of individual members can be magnified and become the problems of the group. This has also been referred to as the one rotten apple syndrome. This study as well as one by Shapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) discussed the

concept of stronger students dominating the cohort group and the effect they have. In the present study, these two concepts, rather than remaining separate, seemed to blend together. Participants often spoke of students who were weaker whose problems keeping pace with the rest of the class dominated the class, instead of the stronger students dominating. The group felt a certain responsibility to carry these students to ensure they were not left behind.

However, in doing so, the situation of the weaker students taking advantage of the stronger students also seemed to occur. The weaker students leaned on certain stronger students so much so that the rest of the group could see the strain on the stronger student. Not found in the research though was how some cohorts viewed the issue. They felt that people in this situation perhaps have a higher emotional intelligence about their fellow cohort members and knew when the situation was becoming too much for the stronger member, so they intervened in the situation so take some of pressure and stress off the student. Thus, another benefit of the cohort is that because situations like this are likely occur, the relationship between cohort members can help to rectify it.

Another aspect of the responsibility some members felt towards other members was expressed by other participants and was not previously found in the literature. Past research had viewed carrying as a negative happening. These participants were acutely aware that carrying of some members did occur but were accepting of it. In fact, they felt that it was reciprocal in nature. They expressed the sentiment that sometimes you need to carry and sometimes you need to be carried. They were willing to have some members lean more heavily on them at times, but with the understanding that they may need to lean more heavily on those members at other times. However, this may not always work this way in some cohorts. Strong mutual respect and trust must exist between members in order for them to rely upon one another in this way.

With respect to ways the cohort structure can support students outside of the social realm, one may examine a study by Milstein (1995) in which it was found that students in cohorts appreciate learning from others who are in similar professional environments. This in turn, can have a beneficial effect on those students in their own professional lives. Students reported that being a member of a cohort helped them to expand their network of resources. They became well acquainted with people in the field of education who they could turn to for support in their professional lives. They gained an appreciation for school levels other than their own that they may not have experienced if they had not participated in a cohort and got to know their fellow members so well. They were also able to turn to one another when they were seeking job promotions because they trusted one another's professional advice and knowledge. Also, the nondivision specific type of cohort not only helped members expand their professional network in education, it also helped them expand it outside of it as well. They now have a (potentially) wider professional network of resources than those in division specific cohorts.

Additionally, cohort members reported that as a result of participating in the cohort, they felt their own professional skills had grown. Their confidence in their abilities as a professional and in how they approached their job increased. They felt that, because of having learned from and grown so close to other professionals in their field who they trusted, they had become better educators. They had enhanced their skills by learning from other strong professionals. Thus, one of the goals of the use of the cohort structure when it was first conceived, to have students professionally develop themselves is being realized.

One other area in which the cohort structure supports students is in terms of the mechanics of the structure itself. The way that the cohort is set up at the university being studied plays a significant role in enabling students to participate in the doctorate in educational



leadership program. Maher (2005) found that one of the aspects of the structure that students greatly appreciate is that how accessible the cohort makes the program. In this study, students shared that because so many aspects of the program are established for them, they are able to focus on the academic piece while continuing to work full time. Their classes are established well in advance for them, class registration is taken care of by the program advisors, and the tuition and location are convenient for them. However, students did share that they would prefer to have a bit more input into the classes they take as they often feel that there are professional aspects of themselves they would like to develop but are not able to during the program because they have no input into how classes are structured. Thus, it is important to take this into consideration when continuing to use the cohort structure in the future.

**Does the Cohort Structure Produce Mutual Academic and Intellectual Stimulation  
of Members or Does it Foster an Atmosphere of Social Dependence  
and Stifle Intellectual Growth?**

According to research by Milstein (1995), cohort members appreciate the support they feel from fellow members and feel that the structure allows them to have the chance to learn from colleagues in similar professional environments. Findings from focus group participants supported Milstein's (1995) assertion. Student talked of how they thought of the cohort structure as a collective learning community. Students were able to develop and hone their professional skills as they learned and worked with others who were in a similar professional environment. They were able to expand their professional knowledge by learning about levels other than their own. They were able to expand their professional network of resources within education as they formed close relationships with people in all aspects of education who they could then call on if they had a question or concern about how to handle a situation. They were also able to expand

their network outside of the field of education as well, particularly in the 48 credit hour cohort as it is comprised of students who are in all fields, not just education. Some 60 credit hour cohorts were also able to expand their networks outside of their own district (as these cohorts were district specific). From time to time, there were members in these cohorts who came from other counties.

Students also indicated that they felt that, as a result of learning in such a closely knit environment, their professional skills grew as well. They learned from others in their cohort who either worked in the same position or worked in higher positions. They saw different ways of approaching or handling a situation from either someone in another school in their county or from another county. Participants shared that how they conducted themselves as a professional continued to grow as they interacted in the cohort and as a result, their professional confidence increased as well.

Cohort students also discussed how they were able to use the relationships they made as a member of a cohort to advance professionally. From the relationships they made, both with people who worked in the same position as them as well as those who were in higher positions, they were able to use them as a resource when moving through the process of seeking a promotion. They were able to rely on these relationships to educate and prepare themselves for the process.

Thus, students were able to develop themselves intellectually and academically as a member of a cohort. They were able to use the cohort experience to learn from one another professionally to expand their skills as an educator. They were also able to expand their professional network of resources. They were then able to take this expanded knowledge and these resources and use it to advance themselves professionally. They were able to either gain the

confidence in their abilities to consider moving up the professional ladder or to actually make the move while in the cohort.

However, this study also collected data that supports other research that is not as favorable about the intellectual development of cohorts. A study by Seifert and Mandzuk (2006) ascertained that the cohort does not necessarily develop the individual. The cohort can have a dampening effect on issues that students feel are important to them but are never addressed in the cohort because the group has deemed them unimportant or the student is afraid to offend the group. This can, in turn, result in not only a reduction in commitment to the program but also a reduction in the development of individual student's confidence about themselves as future leaders.

In the present study, cohort students shared the feeling that there was a lack of diversity of thought in the cohort structure. They felt that because the group members grew so close and came to know one another so well, they did not debate or delve too deeply into issues because they either knew how the group felt about them or they were afraid to offend someone, especially someone who may be making a future promotion decision about them one day. This aspect was not an issue that was brought up in the literature though. As a result of students in division specific cohort being in a cohort with people from all levels in their county, they may be interviewing for a position with one of their fellow cohort members one day. While this can be a benefit, it can also be a negative experience, particularly if they have expressed an unpopular viewpoint in class that may have offended the classmate.

Closely related to this issue is that of the inclusiveness that develops as a side effect of the closeness of the cohort. Students in this study discussed how they felt that when outsiders (those not in their cohort) had to take a class with them, they were not especially welcoming to

them. Participants felt that this was due to reasons of students feeling that the person was only going to be there for a class or was not going to help them advance professionally so they did not need to bother with getting to know them. In doing this, students potentially missed out on learning how another school or division might do things, another viewpoint on an issue, or an opportunity to continue to expand their professional network. Thus, the closeness that develops because of the structure of the cohort can have the effect of encouraging students' feelings that they only need to rely on one another and miss out on opportunities to learn from others.

A study by Teitel (1997) raised the issue of the lack of the development of individual knowledge the cohort structure can have on students. One aspect of it that participants in the present study shared was that they felt the cohort encourages impersonality. They felt that they were seen as one big group and were moved through the program as such instead of being viewed as a group made up of individuals. By viewing the cohort in this manner, students felt their individual needs were not being acknowledged and developed. Part of this issue that students related it to was how they had no input into the classes they were taking. Students felt there were professional skills and areas they would like to develop in the program but were unable to because their input was never taken into account. Instead, their path was plotted for them and they were moved through as a large group. Students felt that, since this is the basis for how a cohort is structured, they were not developing their skills as an individual because of it.

Another piece of this issue raised by Teitel (1997) is the concept of the go to person within the cohort. This is the student who the cohort relies on to have or find the answers to questions they may have about assignments, program procedures, or any other issues the group may have. While in the present study, students, even those who held this position in their cohort, viewed this position in a positive manner, there is a side effect of this issue that they did not

acknowledge. In relying on this person, students are not exploring for themselves and developing their own knowledge base. Instead, they are creating a group knowledge base which encourages increased reliance on one another. They are not developing their own ideas and identity as a professional. This group knowledge base may not meet the needs of all students which in turn, as discussed previously, can lessen student's commitment to the program.

When considering the social dependence that may develop as a result of the structure of the cohort, one must consider a study by Barnett et al. (2000) that found that because of the level of familiarity that develops in the cohort, individual members problems can become not only more evident in the group but also can become the problems of the group. Members become so close to one another that the problems of one member can be passed along to the entire group which, in turn detracts from learning. A study that had a similar finding by Barnett et al. (2000) referred to this situation as one rotten apple syndrome in which the complaints or problems of one person can become the complaints and problems of the whole group because of the close relationship that develops between group members and the extended amount of time they spend together.

In both situations, the cohort can quickly develop into a support group for this member. In the present study, cohort participants discussed how in their cohorts, the problems of one group member keeping up with the class turned into a situation which became extremely taxing on another, so much so that the group had to intervene to take some of the pressure off the stronger member. This, in turn, detracted from learning for the group as a whole and especially the stronger member. This member, although a weak member, played the role of a stronger personality who took over and controlled the group, as was found in studies by Seifert and Mandzuk (2006) and Shapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001). The cohort structure can

exaggerate the influence of these types of members who can quickly monopolize group activities or discussion. They acquire more power because of the extended amount of time the group spends together. Group members in the present study felt responsible for carrying the weaker member which took time and focus away from learning and developing themselves professionally.

Thus, while the cohort structure can encourage some very powerful and beneficial effects for members, it also can structure some negative effects as well. It is not always most effective at developing diversity of thought amongst members or developing the individual. It can set up members to be very inclusive and unwelcoming to outside students and develop a group knowledge base. It also can exaggerate the issues or problems of members within the group so that they affect the group as a whole. Each of these issues can negatively affect intellectual development and support negative dependence on one another.

### **Suggestions for Continued Growth in the Use of the Cohort Structure in Doctoral Educational Leadership Programs**

In order for a cohort to be a collective learning community, based on the quantitative and qualitative findings in the present study, the most important element that must be present is support and trust within the group. While members shared how much they learned from their fellow cohort members and how much they felt their professional skills grew as a result, they kept coming back to the support and trust they had in one another. They shared time and time again how much they had relied on each other both personally and professionally during their time in the cohort. In order to learn from one another professionally, the support system must develop first.

Students must be able to trust one another to ask questions and learn from each other, to go beyond a surface relationship to one that is deeper, more supportive, and productive. For example, a cohort group in which trust and support developed to such a level that they continue to support one another long after their cohort has ended, shared how much they learned from one another as professionals and trusted and relied on each other when they made upward moves professionally. They developed deeper relationships with one another and supported one another through life events, both during and after the cohort had ended. A level of trust and support existed in that cohort that allowed them to develop into a true learning community.

In my own experience with cohorts, before I could begin to trust my fellow cohort members enough to trust their professional skills and judgments, I had to first get to know them as people. I had to learn about them and develop a supportive relationship. As this relationship grew, I began to feel comfortable asking questions of them about professional aspects of their jobs and how they related to the decisions they made. As the relationship continued to grow, I felt comfortable enough and knew that we had a mutually respectful relationship to learn from their areas of expertise and to share my own.

In this study, both 60 credit hour cohorts and 48 credit hour cohorts were included. It was found that, based on quantitative data, the 48 hour cohort is significantly different in their satisfaction level as related to their General Cohort Experience compared to the 60 hour cohorts. Students in 60 hour cohorts reported being more satisfied with their experience than 48 hour students. One could hypothesize that this may be because of the way in which the university being studied has chosen to structure their 48 credit hour cohorts. Students are given some flexibility in how and when they take their classes. They are encouraged to take two classes a semester just as the 60 hour cohorts did but they are not required to take them together or even to

take two courses a semester. Some students choose to take one class a semester; however, in doing so they fall off course with the rest of their cohort and truly lose their cohort. According to the director of the Ph.D. program in educational leadership, students generally take one class together each semester. When considering this picture overall, one can see how difficult it could be for a student to form a close relationship with their cohort when they are not all necessarily in the same place course-wise at the same time.

The university views students who were admitted in the same year to the educational leadership program as cohorts. The students do not generally see themselves this way though. They may form relationships with one or two of the people in their cohort who they grow close to as one student stated in her email to the researcher about taking the survey but do not view this or themselves as being part of a cohort. They are also just as likely to form relationships with people they end up taking courses with who are not necessarily in their cohort.

In order to address this lack of support felt by students from each other in the 48 hour cohorts, one might propose that it is essential that students take all or at least the vast majority of their classes together at the same time. If students are not together, they cannot reasonably be expected to develop a supportive trusting environment with one another. A study by Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2003) found that a well developed sense of community was felt by members of cohorts and they attributed this to the fixed sequences of classes they all took together. The way that the 48 hour cohorts are structured now is reminiscent of an undergraduate experience in which one might take several classes together with a couple of people in their major but take many other classes with a variety of other people. They do not develop a collective supportive learning community with one another because they are not spending time together with one another.



In focus groups, when asked if they would participate in a cohort again based on their experience being a member of their cohort in educational leadership, students often reflected back on the reasons why they had chosen to participate in this cohort. They shared that they had been part of a previous cohort during their master's programs or additional endorsement programs and they had formed such a bond with those classmates and as a result learned so much from them professionally, they had decided to join this cohort because of that experience. I had a similar reasoning process in making my decision to participate in a doctoral educational leadership cohort. I had previously participated in a cohort in my master's program and reflect on how much I had enjoyed learning with and from an unchanging group of students. This group of students trusted one another's judgment and professional skills and knowledge. This, in turn, made each of us stronger professionals overall.

However, if potential doctoral students have had a previous positive experience in a cohort and use that experience in their decision to join a 48 hour cohort, they are likely not going to have the same experience. If they do not feel like a member of a group who they are bonding with and learning from, this could lead to not just a reduction in their commitment to the program but their own learning and professional development could suffer as a result.

One issue that makes taking all or most classes together particularly important is that cohort students in doctoral educational leadership at the university being studied are off-campus students. They are full-time working professionals and would not otherwise interact with one another outside of class, especially as the 48 hour cohorts are not division specific cohorts. These students do not even have the chance to see each other at school or county events. Thus, the only time they are guaranteed to see one another is in class and if that class time is reduced because they are not necessarily taking all the same classes at the same time, the likelihood of a strong

supportive bond (and by extension professional learning community) developing is even less likely. Therefore, it is essential that students are required to take all or most of their classes together.

However, in focus groups, one element related to class selection that was discussed is students' dissatisfaction with not being able to have any input into the classes they take and not seeing a connection between the class and educational leadership. Students felt that there are areas of themselves they would like to further develop professionally and are not able to in the program because their input is never solicited. To address this, the department could survey the cohort at the beginning or at various points in the program for ideas or suggestions about classes they would like to take or areas they, as a cohort and as an individual, would like to strengthen. In doing so, the participants would be able to continue to develop their professional skills and understand why they are taking the class and its connection to their program. While the department may not always be able to fulfill these requests, by making the students feel as though they are a part of the process, this will go a long way towards making students feel like they have ownership in the program and their learning.

Additionally, two other areas that were developed for the 48 hour cohorts that the department should continue to focus on and support are the research colloquia offered each semester and the online community of practice. The research colloquia is an opportunity for doctoral students to be on campus, see one another, and share their research with one another. The online community of practice is an online space in which students can communicate and share with one another. Both of these tools were developed in order to develop a sense of community for those 48 hour students who may not necessarily feel they are part of a cohort as the 60 hour students did. It serves the purpose of helping those students to feel support from

those in other cohorts as well just as the 60 hour cohort students received support from students who had participated in other 60 hour cohorts.

One suggestion for changing the format of the research colloquia is to hold it during the evening instead of during the day. People who are in these cohorts are typically working full time jobs and participating in their classes in the evening. Often their employer supports their participation by allowing a more liberal leave policy but some students may be participating in the program without their employer's support, thus making it even more difficult for them to take a half or full day off from work to attend. Thus, if it was held during the evening in place of a class, students would be more likely to attend and benefit from this resource. This would require the cooperation of all faculty teaching educational leadership classes on this particular evening but explaining the purpose of the require attendance would hopefully overcome this obstacle.

While the cohort structure in educational leadership enables students who are working full time to earn a doctoral degree in a manageable amount of time and at a mostly affordable price, there are several other suggestions to consider in order for the use of the structure to continue to grow at the university being studied. First, one may consider as a way to make the process of choosing a dissertation chair and committee members easier for students, the department could encourage or require each faculty member to teach at least one class for each cohort during their 4 years of classes. This would allow cohort students, who very rarely come onto campus during the class portion of their program, a way to meet each person who would be eligible to chair or serve on their committee. They would be able to get to know each faculty member and gain an understanding of their research interests as well as their method of working.

This would reduce a bit of the stress associated with approaching a potential chair and choosing a committee as this was something that was mentioned several times during focus

groups. The awkwardness of meeting a person for the first time and asking them to chair a committee or having to do so over email or the telephone was found to be very stressful. If all faculty members were not able to teach a class at some point over the 4-year process, they could also serve as guest lecturers a couple of times so that students could at least put a face with a name and at best, have a brief overview of their research interests.

Additionally, having some sort of standardization or better understood/known expectations for serving on or chairing a dissertation committee would benefit both faculty and students. While it is understandable that every faculty member has a different method of dissertation committee membership, it seemed that through focus group interviews, different chairs played vastly different roles for their advisees. This, in turn, seemed to create confusion and tension amongst students. Re-examining university and department expectations would allow both faculty and students to feel as though they know what to expect from the process and to know that they are receiving approximately the same level of support as their fellow students.

In terms of helping cohorts learn from one another as well as to address the issue of inclusiveness, both issues that were discussed in focus groups by students, the department might consider having cohorts take at least one class together or perhaps teaching two sections of the same class during one semester and mixing the two groups. Both classes would have members of each cohort in the class. Thus, members would not always be able to rely solely on their own members or their go to person for answers. They would need to create relationships with one another in order to succeed in the class and in turn, enhance their professional skills and enlarge their professional networks.

The department should definitely consider continuing to retain one university contact person for each cohort as their own go to person. This person would continue to answer

questions the group has as well as meet with them with information about the upcoming semester and paperwork needs. It was mentioned a couple of times during focus groups how much they preferred to have one person as their source of information instead of getting different answers from different people. Based on what focus group participants discussed, it does not seem as though they were clear that this is one of the official roles of the go to person in the department. Thus, the department should consider continually explaining and reminding current students each semester of this role and how they can best utilize it during their doctoral program. This potentially could help to alleviate some of the stress students experience about procedures and structures of the program, especially during program milestones.

Additionally, the department may consider having small information sessions at various points for each cohort as they move through the program. During these sessions, upcoming milestones would be discussed such as the comprehensive exam, the concept paper, choosing a committee, etc. Students mentioned the Doctoral Day event that the department held and while it was considered by some to be useful, others expressed concerns about the sheer size and amount of information being overwhelming. The smaller cohort specific sessions could be conducted by the contact person for each cohort and at these sessions, the cohort could also meet one or two faculty members and have a chance to get them in a smaller setting.

Finally, as a method of continued evaluation of the cohort structure at this university, the department may consider having graduating students complete a survey or evaluation of their experience. This could also occur at various intervals through out the program. The questions on this survey or evaluation would focus specifically on students experience with the cohort structure-what they found/find most and least useful about it, what they would change about it, etc. In doing this, the university would be able to continually receive feedback about each cohort

and be able to evaluate it in terms of how each specific cohort was conducted and changes they may need to make for the continued successful use of the cohort structure.

### **Summary and Recommendations for Future Research**

According to Yerkes et al. (1995), in order for a cohort to be successful, they must do more than enjoy one another's company and share the same time, space, and professors. Instead, they must help one another, work cooperatively, celebrate one another's successes and develop each other's talents and skills over time. The present study highlights the importance of cohorts supporting one another but also developing the skills of one another. In order to learn from one another, cohort members must trust and support each other so that they feel comfortable seeking and providing assistance in developing their professional abilities and becoming better educators.

The cohort structure has the potential but in order for this supportive relationship to develop, students must actually take their classes together so that they have an opportunity to get to know one another well enough for this relationship to grow. Part of being a cohort is seeing and spending time with your fellow cohort members. Through this sustained interaction with one another, students develop relationships that enable both support and trust to grow but also allows students to learn from one another and strengthen their skills as a professional, which was the original basis cohorts were founded upon.

In order to further extend the body of research on the use of the cohort structure in doctoral educational leadership programs, there are several areas to consider for future research. One area of this study, as it was conducted here, that could potentially be adjusted or considered in future research would be when conducting focus groups to ensure that they are of a mixed nature, meaning participants in each group are not all from the same cohort. When answering some of the questions, especially those that alluded to the group having to provide a great deal

more support to or carry a certain member, participants may be less willing to disclose this if that member or a close friend of that member is in the focus group with them. If they were in a group with people who are from other cohorts and are unknown to them, they may be willing to be more open in their answers, which in turn benefits the data and resulting understanding of the cohort structure.

An additional area to consider would be to replicate this study but to include faculty members of the educational leadership department as well. The faculty would take the survey and participate in a separate focus group just as in this study. The responses of the two groups could then be examined to provide an understanding of how the faculty perceives the way students are using the structure versus how they do in reality. This information would be useful data as the faculty members are the ones who make decisions about how the cohort will be structured and other decisions affecting the cohort.

Another possible area of future research would be to conduct this study on one or more cohorts separately and to follow the group through the lifespan of their cohort. The survey would be given and focus groups would be held at the same intervals (i.e., end of each semester, every 6 months) and one could examine how or if their responses about the structure change over time. It would also be useful because in conducting the study in this manner, one might become aware of problems areas that need to be corrected or addressed and that may be hard for participants in a study to remember at the end of their cohort experience or one to 2 years later.

In this same vein, it is also important to keep in mind that “distance makes the heart grow fonder.” Thus, while members in the above suggested format may be able to more accurately report on issues they found troublesome with the cohort either at the time they are happening or shortly after, it may be harder for them to remember the degree of difficulty they experienced at

the time if they are discussing it anywhere from a year to 5 years later. They may also remember the issue with less negative feelings because they are finished with the program and no longer have to deal with that issue.

Another possible area of research on the use of the cohort structure involves conducting the same study solely with members of the new non-division specific 48 hour Ph.D. cohort participants. One member participated in a focus group in this study and shared how differently his cohort is structured and as a result, how different his interactions have been with his classmates and all that he has learned from them. It would be useful in future planning for the use of this cohort structure to be informed about how members of these types of cohort view it and how or if it affects their growth as a professional.

On a similar note, one could also conduct the study as it is designed but compare the responses of members of the 60 hour Ph.D. division specific cohort members to those of the 48 hour Ph.D. nondivision specific cohort members. One could examine if their learning or professional growth is different in either structure or if there are benefits or downfalls to either structure.

Finally, the educational leadership department at the university being studied would benefit from reading this dissertation. It has the potential to enlighten them as to some of the issues that students face as members of this program as well as to help them understand students' perceptions of the program itself and areas they are struggling with. Reading this dissertation could also help them to become aware of issues that previous students have dealt with in the program before current or future students actually reach that point and take action to change or address these issues so that they result in a more positive outcome.



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## **List of References**

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## Appendix A. IRB Approval

# VCU Memo

V i r g i n i a C o m m o n w e a l t h U n i v e r s i t y

Office of Research Subjects Protection  
BioTechnology Research Park  
BioTech One, 800 E. Leigh Street, #114  
P.O. Box 980568  
Richmond, Virginia 23298-0568  
(804) 828-0868, fax (804) 827-1448

DATE: December 8, 2010

TO: Whitney Sherman, PhD  
Educational Leadership  
Box 842020

FROM: Lloyd H. Byrd, MS *LH/DA*  
Chairperson, VCU IRB Panel E  
Box 980568

RE: **VCU IRB #: HM13245**  
**Title: Learning Communities or Support Groups: The Use of Student Cohorts in Doctoral Educational Leadership Programs**

On December 6, 2010 the following research study *qualified for exemption* according to 45 CFR 46.101(b) Category 2. This approval reflects the revisions received in the Office of Research Subjects Protection on December 6, 2010. This approval includes the following items reviewed by this Panel:

### RESEARCH APPLICATION/PROPOSAL: NONE

**PROTOCOL:** Learning Communities or Support Groups: The Use of Student Cohorts in Doctoral Educational Leadership Programs, version 2- 11/23/10

- Survey, version 2/11/23/10, received 12/6/10
- Interview Questions, version 2- 11/23/10, received 12/6/10

### CONSENT/ASSENT:

- Research Subject Information and Consent Form, version 3-12/3/10, 3 pages, received 12/6/10

### ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS:

- Survey Invitation, version 2-11/23/10, received 12/6/10
- Letter of Support, version 2-11/23/10, received 12/6/10
- Interview Invitation, version 2-11/23/10, received 12/6/10
- Survey Reminder Email, version 2-11/23/10, received 12/6/10

The Primary Reviewer assigned to your research study is Lloyd H. Byrd, MS. If you have any questions, please contact Mr. Byrd at [lhbyrd@vcu.org](mailto:lhbyrd@vcu.org); or you may contact Donna Gross, IRB Coordinator, VCU Office of Research Subjects Protection, [dsgross@vcu.edu](mailto:dsgross@vcu.edu) or 827-2261.

Attachment – Conditions of Approval

**Conditions of Approval:**

In order to comply with federal regulations, industry standards, and the terms of this approval, the investigator must (*as applicable*):

1. Conduct the research as described in and required by the Protocol.
2. Obtain informed consent from all subjects without coercion or undue influence, and provide the potential subject sufficient opportunity to consider whether or not to participate (unless Waiver of Consent is specifically approved or research is exempt).
3. Document informed consent using only the most recently dated consent form bearing the VCU IRB "APPROVED" stamp (unless Waiver of Consent is specifically approved).
4. Provide non-English speaking patients with a translation of the approved Consent Form in the research participant's first language. The Panel must approve the translated version.
5. Obtain prior approval from VCU IRB before implementing any changes whatsoever in the approved protocol or consent form, unless such changes are necessary to protect the safety of human research participants (e.g., permanent/temporary change of PI, addition of performance/collaborative sites, request to include newly incarcerated participants or participants that are wards of the state, addition/deletion of participant groups, etc.). Any departure from these approved documents must be reported to the VCU IRB immediately as an Unanticipated Problem (see #7).
6. Monitor all problems (anticipated and unanticipated) associated with risk to research participants or others.
7. Report Unanticipated Problems (UPs), including protocol deviations, following the VCU IRB requirements and timelines detailed in VCU IRB WPP VIII-7:
8. Obtain prior approval from the VCU IRB before use of any advertisement or other material for recruitment of research participants.
9. Promptly report and/or respond to all inquiries by the VCU IRB concerning the conduct of the approved research when so requested.
10. All protocols that administer acute medical treatment to human research participants must have an emergency preparedness plan. Please refer to VCU guidance on <http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/guidance.htm>.
11. The VCU IRBs operate under the regulatory authorities as described within:
  - a) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Title 45 CFR 46, Subparts A, B, C, and D (for all research, regardless of source of funding) and related guidance documents.
  - b) U.S. Food and Drug Administration Chapter I of Title 21 CFR 50 and 56 (for FDA regulated research only) and related guidance documents.
  - c) Commonwealth of Virginia Code of Virginia 32.1 Chapter 5.1 Human Research (for all research).

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## Appendix B

### Cohort Student Survey

On the screens that follow, you will find a survey that will ask you about your experiences as a member of an Educational Leadership cohort. It will take you about 15 minutes to complete and all answers will be sent over an encrypted connection. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from this survey and the study at any time by clicking the “Exit This Survey” icon in the upper right hand corner of your screen. You are not required to answer any questions that you prefer not to simply by leaving them blank. Your decision to participate or not will in no way have any effect on your relationship with your cohort or the university.

Any information obtained in connection with this survey will remain completely confidential and cannot be connected to you. By completing this online survey, you will be giving me permission to publish aggregated findings in my dissertation as well as to present them in professional journals and conferences.

#### Section 1: Demographics

Directions: For each question, please indicate which of the responses best describes you.

1. Gender:                    ☐ Male                    ☐ Female
2. Race:                    ☐ White                    ☐ Black, African Am., or Negro  
                                 ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native  
                                 ☐ Asian Indian                    ☐ Chinese  
                                 ☐ Filipino                    ☐ Japanese  
                                 ☐ Korean                    ☐ Vietnamese  
                                 ☐ Native Hawaiian   ☐ Guamanian or Chamorro  
                                 ☐ Samoan                    ☐ Other Asian  
                                 ☐ Other Pacific Islander   ☐ Some Other Race
3. Cohort Status:  
                                 ☐ First year cohort member (Began in 2009)  
                                 ☐ Second year cohort member (Began in 2008)  
                                 ☐ Richmond cohort member (Began in 2007)  
                                 ☐ Hanover cohort member (Began in 2006)  
                                 ☐ Chesterfield cohort member (Began in 2005)  
                                 ☐ Henrico cohort member (Began in 2005)  
                                 ☐ Henrico cohort member (Began in 2004)  
                                 ☐ Henrico cohort member (Began in 2003)  
                                 ☐ Other
4. Age:
5. Years in Education:

## Section 2: Cohort Experiences

Directions: This section asks you to reflect on your experiences as a member of an Educational Leadership cohort. After reading each of the following statements, please click on the responses that most closely describes your experiences in the cohort.

Please note that ratings are ordered from Strongly Disagree on the LEFT and Strongly Agree on the RIGHT.

	4	3	2	1
	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
6a. Being a member of this cohort helps me to feel a part of the program.	4	3	2	1
6b. I am an outsider in my cohort.	4	3	2	1
6c. Being a member of my cohort contributes to my academic success.	4	3	2	1
6d. Being a member of my cohort discourages the voicing of opinions that might cause controversy or debate.	4	3	2	1
6e. The cohort system encourages the development of cliques.	4	3	2	1
6f. The cohort system encourages deeper discussion of course content.	4	3	2	1
6g. The cohort system encourages and supports the free expression of varying viewpoints.	4	3	2	1
6h. Being a member of my cohort has provided me the confidence to participate in discussion and speak my mind without fear.	4	3	2	1
7a. My cohort fosters the development of trust and respect among members.	4	3	2	1
7b. Being a member of my cohort has helped me learn how to negotiate and compromise.	4	3	2	1
7c. The cohort system has enabled me to develop relationships with faculty and peers that will serve as a resource in my professional life.	4	3	2	1
7d. The cohort system tends to exaggerate the significance of minor student dissatisfaction.	4	3	2	1

7e. The interpersonal relationships within my cohort are distracting to the accomplishment of academic purposes.	4	3	2	1
7g. Overall, my experience with the cohort system has been very positive.	4	3	2	1

### Section 3: About Me

Directions: This series of questions asks you to rate yourself in regards to various aspects of your personality.

Please note that ratings are ordered from Strongly Disagree on the LEFT and Strongly Agree on the RIGHT.

5	4	3	2	1
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree Somewhat</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Agree Somewhat</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
I see myself as someone who....				

8a. is helpful and unselfish with others.	5	4	3	2	1
8b. has a forgiving nature	5	4	3	2	1
8c. is generally trusting	5	4	3	2	1
8d. is emotionally stable, not easily upset	5	4	3	2	1
8e. is considerate and kind to almost everyone	5	4	3	2	1
9a. likes to cooperate with others.	5	4	3	2	1
9b. tends to find fault with others	5	4	3	2	1
9c. starts quarrels with others	5	4	3	2	1
9d. can be cold and aloof	5	4	3	2	1
9e. is sometimes rude to others	5	4	3	2	1

### Section 4: Cohort Community

Directions: This section asks you to consider your experiences as a member of your cohort in regards to how the cohort may or may not have benefited you.

Please note that ratings are ordered from Strongly Disagree on the LEFT and Strongly Agree on the RIGHT.

4	3	2	1
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>

10a. I believe that that the contacts that I have made in my classes will open future doors for me.	4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---	---

10b. I believe that the friendship that I have established in my classes will significantly increase my chances of obtaining a future position.	4	3	2	1
10c. My relationships with other students will enhance my professional standing.	4	3	2	1
10d. My relationships with other students will help me to succeed in the future.	4	3	2	1
10e. There are no professional benefits to networking with students in class.	4	3	2	1
10f. Establishing relationships with other students provides no advantage when applying for a position.	4	3	2	1

### Section 5: Community of Learners

Directions: These questions ask you to consider your cohort experience in regards to the relationships between members.

Please note that ratings are ordered from Strongly Disagree on the LEFT and Strongly Agree on the RIGHT.

	4 <i>Strongly Disagree</i>	3 <i>Disagree</i>	2 <i>Agree</i>	1 <i>Strongly Agree</i>
11a. Students in all my classes consider themselves team members.	4	3	2	1
11b. Students in all my classes accept each other as equals.	4	3	2	1
11c. I feel part of a group in my classes.	4	3	2	1
11d. My classmates feel welcome and comfortable in classes.	4	3	2	1
11e. I feel comfortable expressing my opinions to other students in my classes.	4	3	2	1
11f. I feel close to other students in my classes.	4	3	2	1
11g. I feel that I can count on other students if I need help with my courses.	4	3	2	1

### Section 6: Cohort Relationships

Directions: This section asks you to consider your feelings about the members of your cohort.

Please note that ratings are ordered from Not At All on the LEFT and Very Much on the RIGHT.

4	3	2	1
<i>Not At</i>	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>Like</i>	<i>Very Much</i>
<i>All</i>			

12a. How much did/do you like your fellow cohort members? 4 3 2 1

### Section 7: Further Study

If you would be willing to further share your experiences as a member of a student cohort in a Doctoral Educational Leadership program through participation in a focus group, please email the researcher at browncj3@vcu.edu or reply to the survey invitation email. In the email, please provide your contact information so that the researcher may contact you at a future time for purposes of participation.

Participation in the focus group is completely voluntary and your decision to participate or not participate will not affect your status with the university.

Thank you for your time and information. It is greatly appreciated.

## **Letter of Support**

Past and Present VCU Doctoral Educational Leadership Cohort Members:

I hope this email finds you well and settled into your new school year. We, as a department, constantly strive to enhance the Educational Leadership program here at VCU. One of the most important kinds of information that contributes to the decisions we make is student feedback about their experiences as members of our various cohorts. We want to know what students feel works well about our cohorts and the program as well as what they feel needs to be improved. We are also interested in how students use the cohort experience to benefit themselves.

I am currently serving as a member of one of your colleague's dissertation committee. Christy Brown (Hanover cohort) is examining how students use cohorts in doctoral Educational Leadership programs. This information is invaluable to the department as there is both a quantitative and qualitative component to her study. On (DATE), you received through email, a link to her survey asking you to share your experiences. Please take advantage of this opportunity, both in terms of helping a colleague who is in either the same position you were once in collecting data or whose position you will be in one day, as well as it is an excellent opportunity for you to share your experience-both the positives and the negatives-and be a part of enhancing our program for future students. Please keep in mind that taking the survey is completely voluntary and your decision to participate or not participate will in no way have any effect on your status with the Educational Leadership program.

There is also a qualitative component to the project in which volunteers will be interviewed in-depth as part of a focus group about their experiences. If you are willing to be interviewed, you may either respond to her original email inviting you to take part in the survey or email her at [browncj3@vcu.edu](mailto:browncj3@vcu.edu).

Thank you for your time and consideration, both in aiding this project as well as the Educational Leadership department. If you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study, please do not hesitate to contact me either by email or phone (804.827.2655).

Sincerely,

Dr. Jon Becker, J.D., Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Virginia Commonwealth University

## **Appendix C**

### **Survey Invitation**

Dear Fellow Cohort Member:

The attached survey is part of my doctoral dissertation in the Educational Leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University. You have all either been in my position or will be in it one day, asking your fellow colleagues to help you collect data in one way or another for your dissertation. This survey pertains to doctoral students experiences as a cohort member in the Educational Leadership program. Please take a moment to complete the survey and keep in mind that the survey will close on (date).

Responses to the survey will be completely confidential and no information about any individual respondent or any individual school or district will appear anywhere in any written or verbal report of the research. Furthermore, I am not asking for any names or identifying numbers on the survey. Please keep in mind that taking the survey is completely voluntary and your decision to participate or not participate will in no way have any effect on your status with the Educational Leadership program. Additionally, in the course of the survey, you may skip any questions that you prefer not to answer.

After completing the survey, you will be asked if you would be willing to participate in a focus group to further share your experiences as a cohort member. If you are, please respond to this email or send me a separate email at the address below with your contact information. This information will not in any way be connected to the answers provided in the survey.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email (browncj3@vcu.edu) or by phone (804.761.8893) or you may contact my chair, Dr. Whitney Sherman at (whsherman@vcu.edu) or by phone (804.828.8724). Thank you very much for participating in this important research endeavor.

The survey can be found by clicking on the following link:  
<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/3LNN7NF>

Sincerely,

Christy Brown  
Doctoral Student  
Virginia Commonwealth University

## **Appendix D**

### **Survey Reminder Email**

Dear Fellow Cohort Member:

On (date) you received an invitation to participate in a survey that I am conducting as part of my dissertation research on doctoral students' experiences in a cohort in Educational Leadership. If you wish to participate in the survey, keep in mind that it will close on (date). Remember, taking the survey is completely voluntary and your decision to participate or not participate will in no way have any effect on your status with the Educational Leadership program.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email (browncj3@vcu.edu) or by phone (804.761.8893) or you may contact my chair, Dr. Whitney Sherman at (whsherman@vcu.edu) or by phone (804.828.8724). Thank you very much for participating in this important research endeavor.

The survey can be found by clicking on the following link:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/3LNN7NF>

Sincerely,

Christy Brown  
Doctoral Student  
Virginia Commonwealth University



## **Appendix E**

### **Focus Group Invitation**

Dear Fellow Cohort Member,

In December 2010, you participated in a survey I conducted on doctoral Educational Leadership students' experiences in a cohort. At the end of the survey, you indicated that you would be willing to further share your experiences about being a member of a cohort in a focus group.

If you are still willing to do this, please reply to this email within a week of receiving it and provide the following information: your name, phone number, and best way to contact you. If you are no longer interested in participating, please reply to this email and indicate this.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email (browncj3@vcu.edu) or by phone (804.761.8893) or you may contact my chair, Dr. Whitney Sherman at (whsherman@vcu.edu ) or by phone (804.828.8724). Thank you very much for participating in this important research endeavor.

Sincerely,

Christy Brown  
Doctoral Student  
Virginia Commonwealth University

## **Appendix F**

### **RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

**TITLE:** Learning Communities or Support Groups: The Use of Student Cohorts in Doctoral Educational Leadership Programs

**VCU IRB NO.:** E HM13245

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the study staff to explain any words that you do not clearly understand. You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore how doctoral Educational Leadership cohort members primarily use the cohort structure, as a learning community or as a social support group. You are being asked to participate in this study because you either are currently or have been a member of a doctoral Educational Leadership cohort at the university being studied.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT**

If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered and understand what will happen to you.

Focus groups will be conducted for this study between November 2010 and March 2011. If you are a participant, you will be asked to participate in one session that will last approximately forty-five minutes. The questions asked in the focus group will focus primarily on your experience as a member of a doctoral Educational Leadership cohort. You will be asked to discuss topics such as sources of social support within the cohort, how you have addressed concerns or questions about class assignments or the cohort structure itself, and what you found most and least useful about being a member of the cohort and the structure. Your focus group will be tape recorded to ensure that your responses are being reported accurately. No names or other identifying details will be recorded on tape. Significant new findings developed during the course of the research which may relate to your willingness to continue participation will be provided to you.

#### **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

While it is not anticipated that discussing this subject will cause you to be uncomfortable or feel upset, you do not have to discuss any subjects that you do not wish to and you may end your participation in the focus group at any time.

## **BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS**

You may not get any direct benefit from this study. However, the information resulting from people in this study may help us design better cohort models for doctoral Educational Leadership students.

## **COSTS**

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend participating in the focus group.

## **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

The names of all participants who volunteer to participate in the focus group for the qualitative portion of the study will be entered into a drawing for one \$10.00 gift card to Target. Only one participant will win the gift card.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

You may choose not to participate in this study.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of focus group notes and recordings. Data is being collected only for research purposes. Your data will be identified by ID numbers or pseudonyms, not names, and stored in a locked research area. All data will be kept in password protected files and these files will be deleted upon completion of this project. Focus group notes and recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet (paper notes) and/or a password protected file (electronic notes) for six months after the study ends and will be destroyed at that time. Access to all data will be limited to study personnel.

We will not tell anyone the answers you give us; however, information from the study and the consent form signed by you may be looked at or copied for research or legal purposes by Virginia Commonwealth University.

What we find from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers.

Each focus group will be audio taped, but no names will be recorded. At the beginning of the focus group, all members will be asked to use initials only so that no names are recorded. The tapes and the notes will be stored in a locked cabinet. After the information from the tapes is typed up, the tapes will be destroyed.

## **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

Your participation in this study may be stopped at any time by the study staff or the sponsor without your consent. The reasons might include:

- you have not followed study instructions;

- administrative reasons require your withdrawal.

## QUESTIONS

In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact:

Dr. Whitney H. Sherman, Associate Professor  
Educational Leadership Department, School of Education  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
Room 2106, Oliver Hall  
P.O. Box 842020  
Richmond, VA 23284-2020  
Office: (804) 828-8724  
Fax: (804) 827-0771  
Email: whsberman@vcu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact:

Office for Research  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 113  
P.O. Box 980568  
Richmond, VA 23298  
Telephone: 804-827-2157

## CONSENT

I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.

Participant name printed	Participant signature	Date
Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent		
Discussion / Witness (Printed)		
Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent	Date	
Discussion / Witness		
Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above)	Date	

## **Appendix H**

### **Focus Group Interview Questions**

#### **I. Demographic Questions**

- a. How many years have you worked in the field of education?
- b. How many years have you spent in a cohort?
- c. What is your current position?

#### **II. Social Support**

- a. Think about the time since you have enrolled in the Ph.D. program. During this time, when you feel that you have need social support, whom have you turned to first?
- b. Do you feel that students in this cohort support you when you need them to? Describe a specific example-who was involved, and what did he or she do?
- c. Who else do you turn to for support since you've become a student in this program?
- d. What responsibility do you feel for supporting others in the program? Explain what you mean with a specific example-what did you do, for whom, and why?
- e. Compared with other members of your cohort, do you think you have received-and given-similar amounts of support, or have you experienced a lot more or a lot less than others have?

#### **III. Sharing Information and Resources**

- a. When you have questions, about an assignment, how have you found answers to your questions?
- b. Has anyone ever asked you questions about an assignment? Explain with an example if possible.
- c. When you have questions or concerns about the program structure/requirements, how have you found the answers to them?
- d. How typical is your experience compared with those of cohort members in general? Are there some individuals who apparently do not seek answers to their questions in the same way that you do?

#### **IV. Do cohort members find the structure useful? Why or why not?**

- a. What did you find most useful about the cohort structure? Please elaborate as much as possible.
- b. What did you find least useful about the cohort structure? Please elaborate as much as possible.
- c. Now that you have participated in the cohort structure, if you had the chance, would you do it again? Why or why not?

## **V. Closure**

Thank you for your time. At this time, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything else you would like to share? Is there anything you believe I should know?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas with me. As I mentioned earlier, you will not be identified in any way with the information you have provided me. After the interview is transcribed, a copy will be made available to you for your review.

Adapted from:

Seifert, K., & Mandzuk, D. (2006). Student cohorts in teacher education: Support groups or intellectual communities? *Teachers College Record*, 108(7), 1296-1320.

## **VITA**

Christy J. Brown was born on June 20, 1980 in Richmond, Virginia. After completing her Bachelor's of Arts in Psychology and minor in Elementary Education at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia in 2002, Christy began a Master's of Education in Counselor Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. She graduated from this program in May 2004 and was hired as an elementary school counselor at an elementary school in Hanover County Public Schools. Christy has served as a school counselor in this position for the last 7 years. During this time, she began and completed her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership through Virginia Commonwealth University.